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# The Blind Man who was Healed by the Utilisation of the Substances of Creation

[John 9:1-12].

**English Translation [NRSV]** 1. As he walked along, he saw a man born blind from birth. 2. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3. Jesus answered, "Neither this man or his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6. When he had said this, he spat on the ground, and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes. 7. saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" [which means Sent]. Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9. Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10. But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11. He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and I received my sight." 12. They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."



## **Joeli S. Qionivoka**

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The above text tells us that Jesus healed by using the substances of creation and by the power of His words. John 7.2, tells us that Jesus was in the temple early in the morning teaching the people. The narrative of the teaching ends in 8. 59 in which John tells us that Jesus left the temple when the Pharisees wanted to throw stones at him. The text informs us that “as he was passing by he saw a man born blind from birth.” After Jesus identified himself as *φως ειμι του κοσμου*, he brought back the sight of the blind man by mixing His saliva with the soil and anointing the man’s eyes with the command to go and wash in the pool Siloam. The man went and washed and came back seeing. Jesus uses the elements of creation [saliva, soil and water] plus the authority of His words in this healing drama. Such a fact shows that the substances of creation are essential to be used in the process of healing.

The word *πελος* is important because it refers to :

- [i] clay – [a] used in making pottery. In a comparison that has allegorical trait mankind is called *πηλος εις την χειρα* [Greek Lexicon - *χειρα*]<sup>1</sup> *του τεχνιτου*.
- [b] Like the pliable material which the artist uses  
... clay is also the material from which man is made.
- [ii] mud, mire ... especially of the soft mass produced when the ground is wet eg. On the roads  
... Jesus *επτυσεν χαμαι και εποιησεν πηλον εκ του πτυσματος*.<sup>2</sup>

Most important for us, clay is also related to the creation of people. Jesus is acting as Creator by employing mud to “re-create” the blind man’s eyes. The fact that Jesus utilised mud for healing supports its essentialities in the healing process. In Jesus the episode of creation is linked to the re-creation of created things. Job 10.9 says, “Remember that you fashioned me like clay [*πηλος* in LXX]; and will you turn me to dust again?” Job affirms that clay was used in



his creation. Job becomes a representative of human beings. Isaiah 29. 16 speaking on the same line says, “You turn things up side down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay [πηλος]? Shall the thing made say of its maker, “He did not make me;” or the thing formed say of the one who formed it, He has no understanding?” Isaiah agrees about the usefulness of clay because the potter creates human beings with it in lieu of the original sin of Adam and Eve. Undoubtedly, Jesus recognized the significance of this substance of creation because He used it alongside water in this healing episode.

Jesus’ declaration, φως εμι του κοσμου, [9.5], shows His highest moment when He identifies Himself with God [refer Exodus 3. 14; Leviticus. 11. 44; Mark 14. 62; John 8. 58]. However, Jesus’ highest moment becomes the Pharisees’ lowest moment because they thought that Jesus had violated the Sabbath law. There are parallel stories told by the writers of the gospels about the healing of the blind, eg. Matthew 9. 27-31; 20. 29-34; Mark 8. 22-26; 10. 46-52; Luke 18. 35-43; John 5. 2-47. Jesus shows His power in giving sight to those in the world of blindness. This passage is followed by the story of the Pharisees’ investigation of the healing which led to the casting out of the cured man in which Jesus says, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” [9. 39].

Jesus related His work to the work of a judge who heals the blind and makes blind those who see. Undoubtedly, Jesus was referring to the spiritually blind, those who say they have spiritual strength to see yet are in fact blind to discern the righteousness of God. Jesus’ words, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” [9. 41], apparently relate spiritual blindness to sin. The investigation about the healing precedes the parable of the Good Shepherd [10. 1-39]. John places the narrative of the healing of the blind man between two records of teachings, [Jesus the Light of the world, [8. 12-59]; and the Good Shepherd]. The passage is quite independent in nature and separate in form

from the accounts of Jesus' teaching. However, it is related to the overall picture which John wishes to show about the type of Jesus which he formulates in his mind and in his heart. John 8. 1-2, shows that Jesus was in the temple teaching the people but the Pharisees opposed His teaching and wanted to throw stones at Him. Jesus went outside and met the man blind from birth. He healed him and moved on. Out of curiosity about the reality of the healing incident the healed man was brought to the Pharisees and questioned. After an argument between the Pharisees and the man, the healed man was driven out of the synagogue [9. 34]. Consequently, the synagogue can be seen as a symbol of Judaism. As it stands, the sequence of the event shows that for John, salvation is found outside the normal way of Judaism.

The text proceeds in the form of a miracle. It is understandable to speculate that the narrative of the healing underwent various processes of change in oral form before it was put down in written form. It is also important to see how John shapes the picture of Jesus in order to portray his purpose in revealing one aspect of the works of Jesus in the form of the healing act. If John's purpose is to portray Jesus in this manner, and he uses this form and style to achieve his goal, then John should be credited in employing this form in order to reveal the healing acts of Jesus as *shmeia* [signs]. Luke T. Johnson calls this type of form the "symbolic world,"<sup>23</sup> because the narrative of the historical event one sees in the passage does not end in itself but serves as a vehicle to reveal something important. N. T. Wright refers to the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees as the 'clash of the symbolic worlds' which is "linked with the question of why Jesus was executed."<sup>24</sup> Undoubtedly, the oppositions which arise in the ministry of Jesus are continuously invoked through the clash of symbolic worlds.

The healing in this passage is part of the overall work which relates to the ministry of the Messiah partly told by Jesus in 9. 5 that "He is the light of the world," which branches to the mainstream of his mission of salvation. Being the light is related to life while darkness is related

to death. When Jesus refers to Himself as the light of the world He is identifying Himself as the source of light of the world. John identifies Jesus as the source of light and life: the light and life are related. Therefore, according to John Jesus possesses the power to heal the sick from their diseases. John acquaints us with Jesus' use of parts of creation as tools of His healing activity. He uses mud, spittle, water plus the authority of the words of God. Barrett says that "spittle was believed to be of medicinal value," and "in general was accompanied by magical practices."<sup>5</sup> But in this case John's view dictates the fact that the power of God affirms that it was not a magical act. In verse 7, John uses two imperatives: *ὑπογε* and *νιψαι*; the first in the present tense and the second in the aorist middle. The use of the present interchangeably with the aorist shows the balance in the force of the structure of this healing act which would undoubtedly affect the meaning presupposed by John.

It is good to compare the above episode with II Kings 5. 1-27 regarding the healing of Namaan, a commander of the army of King Aram who was healed through the utilising of a substance of creation. The story tells us that Namaan was suffering from leprosy. He learnt of Elisha's healing power through his slave girl. Namaan went to Elisha and Elisha sent words through a messenger saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." After a short moment of unwillingness to submit to the words of Eliza, Namaan went and immersed seven times in the river Jordan, and "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" [II Kings 5. 14]. This act of healing came into being through the use of the water plus the power of the words of the prophet. However, the very fact which invokes the healing situation is Namaan's submission to the words of Elisha. Even so, more emphasis is awarded to the power of the words of the prophet which initiates this healing situation. Another possible interpretation is that the healing narrative spells out the distinction between the water of Syria and the water in Judea, the water of the people set apart for God's purposes and the water of those who are designated as the people of God.

Such a dimension is identical to the healing narrative of John where the blind man was healed by the employing of the water empowered by the words of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the blind man's submission to the words of Jesus Christ, to go and wash in the pool of Siloam invokes this healing situation. However, John Mash maintains:

Now water is introduced as the means of healing, and it will be shown forthwith that the word and deed of Jesus have, even in his life time, quite superseded water as a healing medium.<sup>6</sup>

Marsh's suggestion affirms the fact that the acts of healing performed by Jesus are superior to the healing done by the substances of creation. Etuate M. Kuru in his unpublished work, *The Unity of Word and Water*, sees the co-partnership of word and water as a symbol of the incarnation and that God uses physical materials to reveal Himself. Such a fact produces an identical connotation in the gospel of John. Consequently, the stories of healing in John are identical to the other stories of healing in the other gospels and the styles of healing utilised are more or less the same.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to note briefly the other two modes of healing, namely, "magic and medicine." Magic is another instrument of healing in which the physical and the spiritual needs of the people are comforted. Howard Clark Kee declares,

Magic is a technique, through word or act, by which a desired end is achieved, whether the end lies in the solution to the seeker's problem or in damage to the enemy who has caused the problem.<sup>8</sup>

Kee further points out that the "equipment employed by a magician, which includes metal plates covered by strange characters, bones of birds of ill omen, bodily member of corpses ... blood, skull snatched from wild animals entrails, well water, cow's milk, honey, meal, hair and perfumes."<sup>9</sup> However, Stephen Benko while writing on "magic and divination," says, "Magic is an attempt by human beings to compel a divinity, by use of physical means, to do what they wish



that divinity to do.”<sup>10</sup> By following the information given by Kee and Archtemeir, it is probable to say that magic is an act in which superhuman powers and physical materials are incorporated to produce what the magician wants. Kee suggests that magic is a skill whereby one is able to do things which are not possible to human beings. D. E. Aune declares, “A magical rite is any rite which does not play a part in organized cults – it is private, secret, mysterious and approaches the limit of a prohibited rite.”<sup>11</sup> This dimension is important when one wishes to highlight the distinction between magic and miracle. There is evidence of magic in the Old and New Testament which shows that the practice of magic occurred in the period of the Testaments; for example, in Deuteronomy. 18.10, Yahweh set up prohibitions on practice of magic [refer also Exodus 7.11; Daniel 2.2; Acts 8.11; Acts 19.19; Matthew 2.1, 7, 16; Galatians. 5. 20; Revelation 9.21; 18.23].

The word “medicine” is not mentioned in the New Testament but according to James E. Strange, “Some scholars have sought to explain certain features of the gospel miracles as evidence of medical or magical technique.”<sup>12</sup> Strange reports that the two techniques are ‘the laying on of hands and the application of spittle and mud made from it to the affected part.’<sup>13</sup> These stories are found in Mark 8.22-26 and John 9.6. However, Strange disagrees with scholars and says that, “there is no hint of conscious or even implicit medical or magical technique here ... these stories lead directly into the question of Jesus’ role as the anointed one.”<sup>14</sup> As it stands, one may surmise that the laying on of hands and the use of spittle or mud are not self-power generated techniques but these styles become instruments of healing only when they are generated by the power of God. Without the intervention of the divine power these styles of healing can be attributed to magic; but since the power of God becomes the subject in all the healing acts performed by Jesus Christ, therefore, one can say that power is the gift of God and is not derived from magic. The miracles derived from Jesus’ power should be distinguished from magic because they bring into reality the existence of the new

creation. In fact the mud, as we have in the biblical tradition, is used for the creation of humankind. Jesus' healing of the blind man is an act of re-creation.

The healing case mentioned above clearly shows three important things:

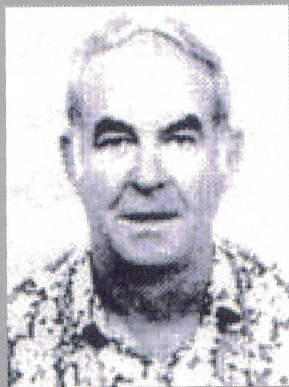
1. The method used is dynamic and effective and this is shown by the immediate result.
2. Jesus at times uses substances of creation as instruments of his healing dramas.
3. The purpose of the acts of healing is honest since it reveals the power of God. Jesus' styles and purposes are not ego-centric in nature.

While looking at the argument given above regarding the essentiality of the utilization of the substances of creation in the healing situation performed by Jesus, one may learn that Jesus obviously counts on the substances of creation as tools of His healing dramas. He appropriately used them because He knew their value since He was a co-creator in the beginning of the world. However, scholars tend to arrive at a disagreement whether the healing of Jesus was divinely-oriented or whether the healing episodes were derived from magical sources. But the argument tends to arrive at the conclusion that if the healing episode was derived from the intervention of the power of God then it blots out any argument about its link to the magical power. Jesus' healing episodes are masterminded and empowered by God Himself because His healing ministry is related to the promulgation of His Messiahship and that is to be the source of life and light to the world engulfed with darkness and death.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Wesley J. Perschbacher, ed. [1990], *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Peabody: Hendrickson, p. 37.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer, 1979, *A Greek Lexicon in the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 656.
- <sup>3</sup> Luke T. Johnson, 1986, *The Writing of the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress, p. 12.
- <sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, 1996, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress, pp. 369-370.
- <sup>5</sup> C.K. Barrett, 1978, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, pp. 211-212.
- <sup>6</sup> John Marsh, 1968, *The Gospel of John*, London: Penguin, p. 249.
- <sup>7</sup> Refer Matthew 9. 27-31; Mark 8. 22-26; Luke 18. 35-43 and John 5. 2-47.
- <sup>8</sup> Howard Clark Kee, 1986, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in the New Testament times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Kee, p. 96.
- <sup>10</sup> Stephen Benko, 1985, "Magic and divination," in Paul J. Archteimeir, [ed.], *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 641.
- <sup>11</sup> D. E. Aune, 1986, "Magic," in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, [ed.], *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, p. 214. [See also John Dominic Crossan, 1991, *The Historical Jesus*, New York: Harper Collins, pp. 304-310; and, John P. Meier, 1994, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. II, New York: Doubleday, p. 560-561].
- <sup>12</sup> James A. Strange, "Beth-zatha," in David Noel Freedman, [ed.], 1992, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. I, New York: Doubleday, p. 663.
- <sup>13</sup> Strange, p. 663.
- <sup>14</sup> Strange, p. 664.



**Frank Hoare S.S.C.**

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## The Relationship of Jesus with Samaritans *A Lesson for Fiji*

In John 17:20-21 Christ prayed for his followers as follows, "I pray... they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be one in us." This unity among followers that Jesus prayed for is often impeded by barriers of ethnicity. In the Israel of Jesus' own time there were ethnic and religious divisions between Jews and Samaritans. The gospels only report four encounters of Jesus with Samaritans but by examining these together in the context of contemporary social relations we see Jesus transcending political, social and religious prejudices of his time. Jesus' attitude to ethno-religious divisions of his time provides us with spiritual principles which critique our ethnocentrism, and which inspire a more deeply human approach to interethnic relations.<sup>1</sup>

The gospel stories challenge us as individuals and as groups to be converted from a self-centered to a

God-centered perspective. Thus in interethnic situations, each group of Christians needs to apply Jesus' teaching to its own group rather than use it as a justification against another group. In this article I draw no direct correlation between the Jews and Samaritans on one hand and specific ethnic groups in Fiji on the other. Each group must apply the message of Jesus in a responsive spirit to their own situation.

## Jews and Samaritans

The Samaritans lived in the province of Samaria, between Judea and Galilee, in the tribal regions of Manasseh and Ephraim.<sup>2</sup> Jews considered Samaritans schismatic. The Samaritans refused to worship in the Jerusalem temple, which was associated with David and Solomon. They, in fact, only accepted as scripture the Torah, the first five books of the First Testament; they claimed descent from the Patriarchs (John 4:12) and they made Moses a special focus of their faith. They strictly observed the Sabbath. Children of both sexes learnt the law and their women attended the synagogue.<sup>3</sup>

Jews also considered Samaritans to be racially different from them. From 2 Kings 17 and Josephus, we know that the Jews claimed that the Samaritans were colonists brought into Samaria by the Assyrians from other conquered lands. The Samaritans, however, maintain that they are direct descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh who survived the deportation of Israelites from the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. The Samaritans are probably descendents of both of these groups.<sup>4</sup>

Jews and Samaritans had a long history of hostility. In 128 B.C.E., for instance, the Jews destroyed the Samaritans sanctuary on Mt. Gerizim and the newby town of Shechem. The Samaritans in turn harassed the Jews at different times and created disturbances at the Jewish Passover, especially between 6 and 9 C.E.

From the foregoing we see that Samaritans were geographically, theologically and, as far as Jews were concerned, ethnically distinct

from Jews. In New Testament times there was clear enmity between them and the Jews. This division between Jews and Samaritans is mentioned directly in John 4:9 – “But the Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?’ (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.)” The final sentence here shows that Jews regarded the Samaritans as ritually impure and segregated themselves from them.

### A Note on Luke’s Universalism

The Synoptists indicated that Jesus’ mission was, in general, limited to the Jews. This is seen in Matt 10:5 as Jesus sends out his disciples, “Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Luke’s Jesus, too, gives first place to the Jews, the children of Abraham.<sup>5</sup> But Luke is keen to break through divisions and he emphasizes the universal offer of salvation in his gospel.

His universalism, though, means not that God’s covenant with the Jews has been superseded but, rather, that God’s promises to Israel contain the extension of salvation to the Samaritans and the Gentiles from the beginning. Luke understands Jesus as making salvation available to all marginalised groups, and this includes the Samaritans.

### Luke 9:51-56 Samaritans refuse hospitality to Jesus

Jesus personally experienced the ethno-religious prejudice and discrimination characteristic of those times.

When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him. On the way they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his reception there, but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?” (Luke 9:51-54)

Jewish culture was based on honour and shame as we see in Jesus' strictures against the Pharisees for their cultivation of honour (Matthew 23:5-7) and in his story of the dishonest steward who, on losing his job, was ashamed to beg (Luke 16:3). Self-worth came from social recognition. The individual's identity was importantly linked to his institutional role.<sup>6</sup> So, when their Rabbi and prophet were insulted by the refusal of hospitality, James and John, his followers, felt honour bound to avenge the humiliation by calling down fire from heaven in the manner of the prophet Elijah. (1 Kings 18:38-40).

But in this ethnically and religiously polarized situation Jesus refuses to act, according to accepted social norms, with revengeful violence. "Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village" (Luke 9:55-56). He thus rejects the identification of himself with the fiery eschatological reformer, Elijah, whom John the Baptist (and perhaps some of Jesus' disciples) seems to have been expecting (see Luke 7:20). In effect, in refusing to take offence at this Samaritan discrimination, Jesus exemplified a teaching of his sermon on the plain: "To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the persons who takes your coat do not withhold even your tunic." (Luke 6:29)<sup>7</sup>

### Luke 10:29-37 The Good Samaritan

Jesus used parables generally to challenge people to grasp a spiritual truth. However, through the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus offers not so much a spiritual insight but rather a practical model for action. This is confirmed in the way he goes beyond the casuistic question, "And who is my neighbour?" (10:29) that is put to him to finish his story with the admonition, "Go, and do likewise" (10:37). The story illustrates the part of the sermon on the plain that deals with human love – "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" etc. (Luke 6:27-35).

The question is raised sometimes if this story is anti-Jewish. This might be intuited from the report that the Jewish lawyer does not

want to admit that a Samaritan has shown up a Jewish priest and Levite, and uses only the phrase “the one who treated him with mercy” (10:37) to refer to the Samaritan. The story is not, however, anti-Jewish. The point of the story is summed up in the lawyer’s reaction that a neighbour is anyone in need of kindness, even if that person does not belong to one’s own ethnic or religious group. The emphasis is on the last sentence, “Go and do likewise” (10:37).

Jesus’ parable does however, contribute to the larger picture of Lucan “universalism.” By including a Samaritan and making him a paradigm for righteous conduct, it suggests that even a Samaritan has found the way to eternal life.

### Luke 17:11-19 Healing the Ten Lepers and the Grateful Samaritan

It is notable that the group of lepers who called out to Jesus for pity included both Jews and Samaritan. This social interaction would not have been possible in ordinary society at that time. Equally defiled and impure by their physical condition, they overcame inherited prejudices and cultural norms. They had become an inclusive community of affliction. At Jesus’ command they set off to show themselves to a priest.

As they were going they were cleansed. And one of them realising he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus said in reply, “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?” Then he said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has saved you” (Luke 17:14-19).

In this incident, Jesus, the beneficent healer, used his power to liberate outcasts from their evil condition. But the miracle story is made subservient to a pronouncement which contrasts gratitude with ingratitude, a Samaritan with Jews, and the ‘sight’ of faith with the miracle itself.



The emphasis is on Jesus' pronouncement about the reaction of the Samaritan who was a "foreigner," one of another race and not of the house of Israel. The Samaritan "saw" that he was cured and turned back (was converted), glorified God and thanked Jesus. His initial cry for mercy thus terminated in his conversion to God through Jesus. Once again a Samaritan, a member of a group to whom the Jews at that time generally denied the possibility of attaining salvation, is granted that very salvation through faith.

The message is clear. The stranger, the 'other,' can have a faith to respond to God that is superior to a community that believes it is specially chosen and equipped to know and relate with God.

### John 4:4-42 Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well

John the evangelist provides the most complex and theologically rich preface of the four gospel passages that involve the Samaritans. It is uncertain whether St. John's exposition in 4:4-42 has a historical basis.<sup>8</sup> This scene could also represent a projection back into the ministry of Jesus of the conversion of Samaritans (as recorded in Acts 8:1-25) to legitimise the acceptance of Samaritan disciples of Christ in full equality with Jewish disciples in the Johannine community.<sup>9</sup> But whether the passage is historical or only theological, the evangelist supports the inclusion, the equal dignity, in the Christian community, of different groups who come to faith in Christ regardless of ethnicity and background.

Schneiders argues that the passage has a sustained and deep theological treatment of topics of mutual concern to Jews and Samaritans i.e. non-association and ritual purity, the Mosaic-patriarchal tradition as opposed to the Davidic tradition: the mission of the expected *Tabea* (Saviour) of the Samaritans or Messiah of the Jews, the legitimate location of the worship of Yahweh. These topics may have been residual points of difference between Jewish and Samaritan converts in the Johannine communities.

The question of true worship was of great significance to the Johannine community. The Samaritan woman raised this key sticking point between Jews and Samaritans, "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem" (v.20). The temple in Jerusalem and the sanctuary on Mt. Gerizim were major symbols of identity for the Jews and Samaritans respectively. They had fought over them and tried to destroy this symbolic center of the other's identity.<sup>10</sup> Jesus shifts the focus from the location for worship to the manner of worship. He downplays both the temple in Jerusalem<sup>11</sup> and the sanctuary of Mt. Gerizim and stresses instead the need for worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23-24). Jesus points to the need to undergo a faith conversion in which both groups must let go of previously important elements of identity.

The change of focus, according to Brown, participates in the familiar Johannine dualism between "from above" and "from below", heavenly and earthly, spirit and flesh. Johannine theology indicates that, with Jesus, the last times have begun. Temporal things such as temples and sanctuaries are replaced by Jesus. He gives the gift of "living water," the Spirit of truth, to animate the true worship of God. God can now be worshipped as Father, the intimate term used by Jesus for God, by those who have faith in Jesus as God's revelation. Jesus offers the gift of the Spirit as equally to the Samaritans as to the Jews. It is this Spirit that raises believers from the earthly level to the heavenly level.

The Samaritan woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes he will tell us everything" (v.25). To this Jesus replied, revealing his identity as Messiah, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (v.26). The woman responds to this revelation with faith. Just as the male disciples left their boats and followed Jesus, she left her water pot and hurried back to witness among her neighbours to this Jew as the hoped for *Taleb*. She overcame her prejudices through faith. Today, too, a sign of the presence of a heavenly orientation and way of thinking is overcoming

prejudice by recognising God's presence in members of other ethnic groups.

We have seen that Luke pointed up the failure in faith and love of Jews, from whom more could be expected, and how the denigrated Samaritans provided them an example. John, too, contrasted the inability of Nicodemus, a representative of his community, to surrender in faith to Jesus (John 3:1-21) with the enthusiastic and missionary faith of the Samaritan woman, representative of Samaritans in general.

### Applying Jesus' approach to Samaritans to the interethnic context of Fiji

The four texts just examined, provide some key spiritual principles for guiding a group's relationship with another group where there are historical hostilities, incompatible religious beliefs, and ethnocentric denigration. It is a legitimate use of scripture to apply these principles, in the same spirit as Jesus did, to similar situations in the world today, including the situation in Fiji. A vital condition of interpretation is to imitate the New Testament Jesus is not using power to destroy, literally or metaphorically, the 'other' but to respect and include them. All four passages show Jesus' respectful attitude towards a people despised and disparaged by his own people.

We see Jesus not only shattering the stereotypes and remaining free of prejudice, but also, in Luke 9:51-54, refusing to react aggressively to discrimination against himself (Luke 9:53-56).<sup>12</sup> This spiritual discipline goes against the impulses of human nature generally, and specifically in the two major cultures in Fiji. The indigenous Fijian culture puts special value on the person of the chief and discriminates for him with taboos and the unswerving loyalty of his people.<sup>13</sup> The Indo-Fijian culture values 'face' and honour very highly and, largely, justifies revenge. But Jesus persuades his followers to transcend their impulses and witness to truth and justice non-violently. Non-violent assertion is an essential spiritual discipline in multi-cultural groups, because misunderstandings, hurts and perceived injustices will

inevitably occur over time when imperfect people of different cultures live side by side, meet regularly, and have to work and cooperate together.

In the Good Samaritan story the Lucan Jesus chose to make an 'enemy' of his own ethno-religious group an exemplar of love of neighbour. This indicates Jesus' attitude of appreciation for Samaritans and his willingness to critique the failures of his own community. This attitude is important in interethnic relating. Ethnocentrism forms us to express superiority over other groups by contrasting 'our' ideals with 'their' mistakes or failures. To contrast 'their' good deeds with 'our' failures and to challenge one's own group to be self-critical risks unpopularity and alienation. But this spiritual discipline is necessary to counteract ethnocentrism. Self-critique reduces inter-group defensiveness, and inspires both groups to take back projections of their unaccepted behaviours (which they have instead attributed to the other group). The practice of other-affirmation and self-critique by groups and their leaders makes the discussion and resolution of sensitive matters much easier. It does not preclude but rather paves the way for non-violent assertion of truth.

The story of the Good Samaritan illustrated that the good works of love may be found outside one's own ethnic or religious group. So too, in the incident of the grateful Samaritan among the ten healed lepers, we see that faith and spiritual insight may be found in the other ethnic or religious group while missing in one's own. This implies that we be humble, and open to example and instruction from those who may be despised by our own cultural group. A condition for genuine dialogue is the acknowledgement that the 'other' may have spiritual insight and practices that can challenge and inspire our faith. The message of the pericope known as the Healing of the Ten Lepers can challenge the people of Fiji to be enriched through interethnic or interfaith dialogue.

In the account of the Samaritan woman, the Johannine Christ proclaims an inclusive message to communities in Fiji held captive by

past legacies of mistrust and present burdens of anxiety and fear. The challenge is to live a faith in Christ that transcends exclusiveness and superiority. This will be shown by accepting the 'other', the one who is different, as a brother or sister, and child of the one Father. Disciples of Christ are called to accept a revelation that relativises all on which we have depended heretofore. Indigenous Fijians will continue to respect their *vanua* but will acknowledge faith and identity in Christ as primary and more essential. Christian Indo-Fijians will remain proud of their ancient culture but will critique its customs and values through the lens of the teaching and example of Jesus. Those who make this commitment through the power of God's Holy Spirit are able to worship God in Spirit and truth.

John 4:4-42 speaks to situations of diversity in the Christian community today. It encourages an open dialogue on inter-group differences. It provides an example of mutual respect that should characterise such a dialogue. It suggests the importance of a community taking its identity and tradition seriously, but being open to having these integrated with other identities and traditions at a higher spiritual level.

## Conclusion

In treating the relationship between Jews and Samaritans the gospels propose, in vivid story and dialogue form, some key principles of interethnic relating for Christians, then and now. Ethnic leaders in a multi-cultural context should affirm other ethnic groups and be constructively critical of their own group. Group members approach each other with a humble and open attitude, willing to learn from the faith and practices of other groups. Where hurts, apparent injustices and misunderstandings occur in interethnic relations the spiritual discipline of a non-violent search for truth is the Christian approach. The Spirit of the Risen Christ inspires ethnic groups to relativise and transcend exclusive elements of identity, and cooperate in building a meta-narrative (or umbrella story) which includes all groups in the society. Faith in Christ, as God's definitive Word of love to humankind, transforms exclusive ethnic identities to an inclusive unity in diversity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The gospels (and Acts of the Apostles) are not written as history and Jesus did not do and say all that is attributed to him in the Scriptures. But the New Testament is a faith interpretation by the early Christian community of the meaning of the message and person of Jesus Christ. Since it remains normative for us, I have no hesitation in using the words of the gospels because they carry the truth of Jesus and his message for us.

<sup>2</sup> In this introductory section I am mainly dependant on the article on the Samaritans by Robert Anderson in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol.5.(New York:Doubleday, 1992),pp.940–947.

<sup>3</sup> Maccini, Robert Gordon. “A Reassessment of the Woman at the Well in John 4 in Light of the Samaritan Context” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 16 (1994), pp 40-41

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (NY:Doubleday, 1966),p.170

<sup>5</sup> I am mostly indebted for the exegesis of the Lucan passages to Joseph Fitzmyer.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the social dynamics of honour and shame societies see David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp.102-109

<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ peaceful response to this social slight has resonances too of Isaiah’s description of the Servant of the Lord. This image also contrasts with the challenges the social norms or style of an honour based society.

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with  
whom I am well pleased,  
Upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice  
to the nations,  
Not crying out, nor shouting, not making his voice heard in  
the street  
A bruised reed he shall not break and a smoldering wick he  
shall not quench,  
Until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will  
wait for his teaching (Isaiah 42:1-4).

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*  
(London: Burns and Oates, 1980), pp.458-460

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe*  
(New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1999) p.134

<sup>10</sup> In a similar way, in Fiji, Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians have wrestled continually with each other's core identity aspirations of "indigenous paramountcy" and "secure belonging" respectively.

<sup>11</sup> John has made this point earlier in his gospel when Jesus indicates to the Jews that the temple will give way to a rebuilt temple of his body – which can include his resurrected person and the resulting new community (John 2:19-21). The first sign given in Cana

just before this can also be seen as pointing to the same change. The "good wine" Jesus gives is superior to the earlier wine (John 2:10).

<sup>12</sup> Jesus, willingness to "turn the other cheek" and "to love his enemies and to do good to them" greatly impressed such a spiritually sensitive person as Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi made *satyagraha*

(non-violent assertion of the truth) a central spiritual discipline in his social and political struggle in India. So although I address Christians with these values and attitudes, Hindus could also accept them equally.

<sup>13</sup> Some Fijians have often threatened violence to those who 'insult' their chief.

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# Re-conceptualising Salvation: Some Insights from a Solomon Islands Culture towards a Relevant Theology of Salvation for Today



## Introduction

The proposed theological direction for this paper is that there is, or must be, a connection between salvation and the ecological crisis that the world faces. The paper seeks this connection through an analysis of salvation in culture and how this might inform a relevant theology of salvation for today. There are two basic presuppositional (or hypothetical) bases for this paper: first, the prevailing theology of salvation in Solomon Islands is not entirely relevant in view of the current ecological crisis that confronts and threatens the world and, therefore, it needs to be revisited and re-conceptualised; second, religio-culture<sup>1</sup> (indigenous religion and culture) contains and speaks of aspects of salvation that can be utilized in this theological task. In other words, religio-culture also has significant revelatory qualities.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between these two seemingly opposed presuppositions is not one of exclusivism or substitution but one that is, by

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theological necessity, correlational, dialogical and is open to mutual critique. The challenge in addressing these hypotheses is one of method and substance. What method, if any, would both be academically and theologically innovative yet sound to flesh out the theological significance and contents of religio-culture? What kind of theology would most likely form and be “birthed” in this theological process?

Let me make the following clarifications from the outset. First, in addressing questions such as those posed above, this paper does not claim to provide the answers; rather it seeks to make us think again about the kinds of theologies that we inherited, and which have shaped our life and the views and beliefs we hold onto in the light of pressing problems such as climate change and global warming. Second, it is not an aim of this paper to delve into the history of the concept of salvation, or to carry out an etymological analysis of it in the light of Christian scripture, or to engage in a debate on various views of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Rather it starts from what could be argued as the prevailing (popular) understanding of salvation amongst the churches in Solomon Islands, and from an analysis of a cultural understanding of salvation. It begins from a kind of an “ethnographic present” and an “ethnographic past”.

### Methodological Orientation

From the foregoing it should perhaps be clear that I am taking a contextual approach or method to engaging the theological task before us. From the perspective of the beginnings and the subsequent growth and expansion of Christianity, such a method is affirmed by, and deeply rooted in, history: first, from its early beginnings in the Graeco-Roman world through the Celtic and Germanic (Western) cultures, Christianity went through various periods of rigorous and significant, even irreversible, transformations (Wessels 1994); second, in the latter part of the twentieth century, especially in the decades of the 1970s onward, *context* came to the fore of the “theological enterprise,” especially in the so-called “Third World,” and became accepted as a legitimate *theological locus*, or source of theology, in its

own right in addition to the traditional sources of theology, namely scripture and tradition (Schreiter 1985; Stackhouse 1988; Bevans 2002, expanded edition).

Let me now zoom in and briefly summarise the method taken in this paper. My particular method is located within the broader method of theological anthropology that was popularized by theologians like Pannenberg (1968, 1985) and is evident in the work of theologians such as Moltmann (1992) in his theology of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> This method involves the critical analysis and use of anthropological data for primarily theological purposes and aims, and it presupposes a historical-critical approach to the Bible. The particular trajectory or adaptation of this method of theological anthropology for the purpose of this paper is panentheism. In the methodology that I propose I add ethnographic and cosmological data to the analysis, which makes this method multi-disciplinary. All these different categories of data are seen as forming the substance of religio-culture mentioned earlier. In this particular methodology all of these data is seen through and analysed using the “theological lens” of *panentheism*. Ultimately this is a contextual panentheistic methodology.

A further clarification of this methodology is in order. Two key terms here are *panentheism* and *context*. The Greek roots of panentheism indicate its meaning, as stated by Borg (2006, 111):

... pan is the Greek word for “all” or “everything”; *theism* comes from the Greek word for “God,” *theos*; and the middle syllable *en* is the Greek word for “in.” Panentheism affirms that everything is *in* God, even as it also affirms that God is *more* than everything.<sup>5</sup>

Thus panentheism affirms the presence of God in everything and the “dwelling” of everything in God, but it must be stressed that this presence is experienced and “seen” variously in different contexts and at different times. However, it needs to be pointed out that God is neither concretized nor confined within anything, for God is also *more*

than the created order. Hence a contextual panentheistic methodology is one that affirms such deep insight and applies it to the “god-talk” in a given context – applied to the different ways in which God’s presence and “actions” are “seen,” experienced and communicated through a particular religio-culture, including actions, events and situations involving salvation, which is the interest and focus of this paper. The referent culture in this case is that of Bareke and Marovo in Solomon Islands.

A word of caution is also in order: the ever-present danger in this methodology is the failure to distinguish between pantheism and panentheism. Pantheism equates God with everything; it holds that God is everything and everything is God (Boff 1996), – no distinction is made between the Creator and the creature, or between beings and Being – or that everything in creation is “godified” (Tofaeono 2000). It must be made plain and borne in mind that what is meant in this paper is panentheism, not pantheism. The danger in failing to make a clear distinction between pantheism and panentheism can lead to a divinisation of systems and institutions that result in the dehumanisation and destruction of a people. History teaches us that systems and institutions had been legitimated through biblical and theological arguments. The Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler and the apartheid regime in South Africa are two clear examples in this regard. This paper argues that the ultimate standard for distinguishing between pantheism and panentheism is Jesus Christ through the good news of God that he declared and lived by, and which the Church as community of disciples is entrusted to proclaim. Let me now turn to what in my opinion is the popular view of salvation in most churches in Solomon Islands, which could be quite similar throughout Oceania.

### Popular View of Salvation in Churches in Solomon Islands

Following Guiart who analysed mass conversions in New Caledonia and New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu), Hilliard (1967, 480) says that conversion in Solomon Islands fell “within a framework of

millennial anticipation ... a golden and happy future for believers [in heaven] and the promise of Hell for non-believers ...” This has metamorphosed into the current popular understanding of salvation in Solomon Islands. Let us take a step back and look into the historical root that gave rise to such a view. This understanding of salvation was part of the primary focus of the various mission groups to Solomon Islands that sprang up from the Evangelical Revival or the Great Awakening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Garrett (1982, 8) for instance says that “missionary activity was a product of great religious changes in Europe and America”, and Lange quoted by Ernst (1994, 110) points out that the “... Evangelical revival or Great Awakening which swept through Protestantism in the middle of the eighteenth century and greatly affected the Protestant churches of Britain, North America, continental Europe, Australia and New Zealand”, influenced and shaped most Protestant evangelization in Oceania. This historical context is important here because as Garrett (1982) points out, the Revival and Awakening rekindled the zeal to fulfill the Great Commission, and fuelled the passion to save lost souls for heaven. So deeply entrenched was this passion to save lost souls that Tippet (1973, 21) could still say about a hundred years after the intrusion of Christianity in Solomon Islands that what matters most is the “great spiritual salvation of man.” Tippet belittles any other “forms of social salvation” (1987, 153).<sup>6</sup>

This emphasis on salvation as an other-worldly, spiritualistic and eternal existence, or “salvation within the framework of millennial anticipation,” continues to prevail in the various expressions of Christianity in Solomon Islands, particularly in the Evangelical and Pentecostal circles. However, it would not be wrong to say that elements of this understanding are present also within some “sectors” of the historic mainline churches, such as the United Church in Solomon Islands (UCSI).<sup>7</sup> In this theological orientation salvation is entirely the transcendent and sovereign work of God, not a human achievement and does not need any human participation, and it does not depend on, or take from, the salvific qualities of the earth; it is for the future in heaven, not for now and not on the earth; it is a spiritual and inner salvation, not external or physical or social; it is received individually,

not communally and cannot be inherited along family or religious lines. It is noteworthy that Ernst (2006) points out that an individualistic and futuristic understanding of salvation is a characteristic feature of new religious groups throughout Oceania. This Evangelical (and Pentecostal) position is vividly put by Carson (2008, 64) in the following way: “Our true city is the new Jerusalem<sup>8</sup>, even while we still belong to Paris or Budapest or New York. And while we await the consummation, we gratefully and joyfully confess that the God of all is our God, and that we have been called to give him glory, acknowledge his reign, and bear witness to his salvation.”

There are some major problems with this kind of understanding of salvation. In the first place it fails to recognize and acknowledge the “very good” (Gen. 1:31) creation of God, which for us is the concrete symbol of grace or *mana*.<sup>9</sup> The earth – the *vanua*, *fanua*, *fenua*, *hanua*, *aubenua*, *moana*, *pepesa* etc – is the most tangible and immediate form of the grace of God for the people of Oceania. This resonates with what Donoghue says: “... grace in essence is a way of talking about God’s creative, life-giving, beneficent presence to and within all, both personal and impersonal entities, spiritual and material,” [quoted by Wessels (1994, 86)]. Second, the foregoing understanding of salvation can and does lead to a view of the earth as an object and is there merely for human utility on this side of life. For example, during my field research in some parts of Solomon Islands in 2006 I found out that millennial anticipation was, and I am sure still is, one motivating factor in the granting of logging concessions to foreign logging companies, and I will not be surprised if this extends to allowing free reign to other industries, particularly mining. Third, it leads to a kind of fatalistic attitude and a spirituality that is so heavenly focused that it is of little or no earthly value. Because this earth is passing, and because everything will be well in heaven, there is no theological justification to care for the earth and no motivation for Christians to sweat in order to improve life and relationships on earth. All that is important is to ensure that ones’ spiritual life is in order in anticipation of eternal life in heaven. In Ernst (2006) we can see that this “non-involved” type of Christian life spreads throughout Oceania. In light of the

foregoing, I would have to say that the prevailing view of salvation in Solomon Islands is not an entirely relevant perspective in moving towards a theology that re-conceptualises salvation in the context of ecological crisis.

## Salvation in Culture

Let me begin this section by outlining the related terms for salvation in my culture. At the outset, I must point out that *mana*<sup>10</sup> is presupposed in the view and experience of salvation in culture. The term for salvation is *tinazaputu*, which is the noun form of the root word *zaputu*. *Zaputu* can be transliterated as *pull*, as in to ‘pull out’ someone or something from a present or ensuing hazardous situation, including death. However, the English *pull* does not really capture the substance (or spirit) of *zaputu*. Firstly, *zaputu* is the basic human instinct and action (“instinctive-action”) to reach out to someone who is in a situation of risk, threat, danger and potential death. In one sense it is the human “instinctive-action” in which someone marshals all the “inner resources and capacities” – and “external resources” if time is not of the essence in the present situation – for the safety and welfare of another. In another sense it is the human “instinctive-action” of *complete letting-go* by someone for the welfare of another who is in an unwelcome predicament. Thus, paradoxical to the negative view of humanity and its good works as “filthy rags”, *zaputu* points to its goodness and charitableness – qualities commonly associated with God. Secondly, *zaputu* constitutes a saving event where there is no human involvement. Behind such saving event is always divine providence, and the *pull* in this case is associated with the divine. Myths abound in my culture where a saving event is associated with spiritual beings and powers, and with concrete elements (members) of the *vanua*, *aubenua* or *pepesa* such as trees, herbs, mountains, mountain passes and valleys, “clefts of rocks”, sharks and dolphins, etc. (It is interesting to note here that Jonah’s saving event was in the belly of a big fish where God was also present in its darkness and smell! Just imagine!!!) From a panentheistic perspective, therefore, it could be argued that God is involved in salvation in culture.

*Tinazaputu* means both the act of saving and the person or being or event who or which does the saving – the saviour<sup>11</sup> in another word. Reference to a past saving action or saving event is *ta zāputu*. *Tinazaputu* connects the sense of salvation that is inclusive of past, present and, by extension future, saving actions and saving events. This is so because a saving action or saving event today is already a bearing on the future's various possibilities.

Let me now build on the foregoing understanding of salvation by highlighting some of its characteristic features. First, salvation in culture is temporal and pragmatic. The use of temporal here is not in the sense of being opposed to the “spiritual” but in the sense of being time-related and earth-oriented. Salvation happened both in time and place. It had to do with being saved from such factors as enemies, elements of nature and natural calamities, sickness, hunger and thirst, dishonor and disrepute, death and malevolent spirits and so on. People could also be “on the wrong side” of the spirits of the *vanua* and need salvation, which offering of sacrifice would normally achieve. Second, a saving action or saving event occurred within the context of the *vanua* or *fenua*. For instance, a very ill person is saved from certain death through prayers to the spirits, offering of sacrifices to the gods, application of cultural medicine taken from both the land and sea, and even through taking or not taking particular food types. In culture salvation is interactively connected to the *vanua* or *whenua*, to the rhythms and processes and spirits of the land. Third, and in light of the first two mentioned above, salvation is seen and experienced in terms of the basic human welfare of the tribe and community within the context of their total environment. Human salvation is integrally connected to the immediate total environment. From this perspective, salvation constitutes and reflects the human desire for well-being and fulfillment in every aspect of life, be it health, success, fertility, respect, honour and so on. Putting this another way, salvation is seen as the absence of forces that stand in destructive tension with life, such as sickness, death, infertility, poverty, dishonour – the life-denying and life-negating forces – and so on. Fourth, as is perhaps obvious by now, salvation in culture



stresses the *present* – “present salvation” – but is at the same time not entirely deficient of a future aspect. Let me briefly explain this future aspect. Salvation as the human desire for well-being and fulfillment in every aspect of life, or as the absence of forces that stand in destructive tension with it, is beyond full realization and grasp in any human (physical) lifespan. It remains as *rove* (hope) of which only partial realization through time is possible. In this sense *tinazaputu* (salvation) and *rove* (hope) exist side-by-side, where the journey toward realization of the former is sustained by the latter. This ongoing partial realization of salvation, however, does not diminish its total reality. Finally, from all the foregoing salvation in culture embraces all aspects of life and not only the “great spiritual salvation of man” spoken of by Tippet (1967). Due to the fact that a saving act or a saving event, by its very nature bears on both present and future possibilities, change and transformation are inherent in them.

What are the weaknesses of this cultural view and experience of salvation? Let me highlight three (to which counter arguments and counter views could be advanced but which time does not allow me to do.) First, it has been pointed out by various theologians that a major weakness in general in this way of using culture as a departure point for constructing theology is cultural romanticism (Bevans 2002, Schreiter 1985); that is, there is a lack of critical distancing, critical thinking and critical reflection about the culture in question, and it idealises a culture that *was*, but no longer *is*. However, while this danger is real, it is also real that these views and experiences of salvation are not dead and gone; they are not what Phobee describes as “fossil culture,” but are instead part and parcel of people’s livelihood and existence today. Second, it has a weak view of sin and an inadequate manner of dealing with sin and its consequences (Bevans 2002). Admittedly, and it goes without saying, no culture is perfect and as stated above there are contradictions and life-negating and life-denying forces in culture. Here it is important to point out that the biblical word *sin* is not found in the vocabularies of many languages in Oceania. There are words for *wrong* or *bad* but the word *sin* itself does not appear and, therefore, to translate it into indigenous languages was

not a straight forward exercise, and missionaries were not satisfied with the indigenous word equivalents for wrong or bad.<sup>12</sup> It was claimed that these indigenous word equivalents did not capture the depravity of fallen humanity. However, it has to be said that it is theologically indefensible to say that humanity (seen through culture) is totally depraved, or that creation is completely devoid of any grace and goodness whatsoever because of the fall. As Macquarrie (1977, 267) says, "If there were no residuum of original righteousness even in fallen man, no continuing tendency to transcend toward the fulfilling of the image of God and no common grace in creation, then it would be hard to see how salvation could be possible."<sup>13</sup> Third, it has been argued that a cultural view of salvation tends to stress "self-salvation" relative to salvation as the work of God in Jesus the Saviour. From another angle, it has been argued that salvation in culture is only in "mundane matters" and, therefore, not as important and eternal as in spiritual matters (Tippett 1967). As is common knowledge, it is Christian orthodoxy to say that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world, but I would also say that he did not come to abolish the knowledge and experience of salvation. So with these (and other) criticisms before us, how might salvation as viewed and understood in culture contribute toward a relevant theology of salvation for today – that is, relevant in the context of the global ecological crisis? How might such "cultural contribution" to such a theology be enriched by the "Christ Event" embodying as salvation?

## Conclusion: Towards a Relevant Theology of Salvation

For the purposes of this paper a theology of salvation is relevant if the following are an integral part. First, we cannot speak of salvation apart from the *vanua*, *fonna*, *fenua*, *hanua*, *whenua*, *pepesa*, *moana* etc, for to do so would be like neglecting "so great a salvation" that God has graced or "*mana-ised*" the earth with. Likewise, we cannot speak of salvation without first speaking about it from the immediate religio-cultural framework and worldview in which it is constituted

for that is where meaning is made and reality is constructed. Salvation is an integral and constitutive part of a worldview; to denigrate it to a lower level religiosity or as only relating to mundane matters is to belittle the meaning of life and existence for a people, and to deny the grace of God that is the earth. Tuwere (2002), a leading theologian in Oceania, argues along similar lines that we cannot speak of salvation without speaking also of the *vanua*. In the present situation of ecological crisis the language of salvation must change; the new language must, as a matter of necessity, be salvation of the earth and with the earth.

Second, following from the above, the anthropocentric, or human-centred (traditionally *man-centred*), emphasis of salvation must give way to a more earth-centred emphasis. Humanity is only one constituent of the earth community, albeit one that is supposedly “special” and has yet dominated the earth instead of exercising dominion. Its well-being (salvation) is intricately connected to other members or constituents of the earth community. Without trying to lay claims to a perfect mutuality, and acknowledging the contradictions that do exist, a study of culture nevertheless reveals that some degree of mutuality was achieved between human beings and their environments’ constituents (cf. Whiteman 1984; Mantovani 1984). This inter-connectedness and degree of mutuality must be seen as an integral part of a theology of salvation in light of the ecological epidemic that threatens the earth.

Third, the emphasis on individual spiritual salvation in heaven in the future must be revisited. Salvation can be individual but it can also be societal and/or communal,<sup>14</sup> and it is not only spiritual but encompasses the whole of life. Namok (2006, 126) in his Master of Theology thesis in the context of Papua New Guinea speaks of salvation as both physical and spiritual entities, which for Melanesians mean “experiencing fullness of life [which] is associated with nature as life.” Here there is a close association of salvation as fullness of life that is vitally connected to nature – *vanua*, *fenua*, *hanua*, *aubenua* etc – which is seen by Namok as synonymous with life. In an earlier

work focused on Melanesia Fugmann (1984, 281) contends that salvation could be “described in terms of gaining or regaining the ultimate fullness of life ...” This correlates with the Gospels’ view of Jesus as giver of fullness of life (John 10:10). While there is a future (or unfolding) aspect to salvation, primary emphasis is on the present, and within the total environment in which life is lived, not vice-versa. The unfolding of salvation speaks of transformation, but this transformation is not so much for heaven as it is for the earth. (Heaven does not need transformation for it to be truly heaven!). These must become a vital part of a theology that is relevant for today’s situation.

Finally, in light of the foregoing articulations, a relevant theology needs to see salvation in terms of what Haire (1981, 260) describes as “security-creating harmony” for the earth. It is harmony between human beings and all constituents of the earth – harmony on the earth, which correlates with peace on earth announced by the angels in the nativity narratives of the gospels according to Matthew and Luke. But it is harmony that creates and results in a state and a time of secure relationality of all constituents of the earth. This sense of “securedness” means that freedom and goodwill undergird all relationships. As “security-creating harmony” salvation becomes a relational existence and experience on earth, not an individual journey to heaven, and this must form an important aspect of a relevant theology of salvation.

Let me conclude with a simultaneous reflection on the following questions: *what is “Christian” about this theology of salvation?* and, *where is Christ in it all?* It is “Christian” in the sense that through the “theological lens” of panentheism we see the presence and actions of God in culture, including God’s presence and actions in salvation. But more centrally, it is “Christian” because Jesus of Nazareth “entered” and lives as the affirmation and ultimate fulfillment of salvation of the earth. The connection between the Christian idea of salvation and a cultural one is Jesus the new *mana* of God birthed into history, and establishing the new humanity (Tuwere 1992, 2002); or Jesus as the cosmic Christ (Tofaeono, 2000, 256) in whom “an absolute

concentration of the reality of grace reaches its climax point.” Such grace is “not only for humanity, but for all living beings,” (255). From the perspective of theological anthropology, and particularly through a contextual panentheistic “lens”, I am inclined to say that in Jesus of Nazareth God was seen and experienced most fully. Through his being a *particular* individual who lived in, and endured life within, a harsh and impoverishing socio-economic environment that is Palestine, he experienced salvation in “mundane earthly” matters. Here, being *particular* is a strength – not a weakness and not a limitation. Only by being particular, by sharing the basic human instinct and desire for salvation, and by sharing in its outworking in a particular situation, was Jesus able to share in the universality of such desire, for indeed such desire is universal. In this way, too, and as someone in whom God was seen and experienced most fully, Jesus affirmed salvation in (cultural) mundane matters instead of abolishing it, thereby establishing and offering the universal basis for salvation. However, most crucially still Jesus, in whom the fullness of God dwelt, heralded something novel, something entirely new – the coming of the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God in the gospel according to Matthew (6:10) is for the *earth*, of which Borg (2006, 186) says “there is widespread agreement among scholars on both sides of the division.”<sup>15</sup> Will the “surpassing greatness” of the kingdom of God discard all that is good and worthwhile, including the benefits of living responsibly and respectfully in the earth? Will it ignore or even destroy the progress made in ensuring justice not only for humanity but for the earth as a whole? By extension let the following statement by the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution, Article 39, provides us with food for thought:

Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Nevertheless, to the extent that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God. For after we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood, and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and

enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, (Dulles 2002,110, expanded edition).

Let me now close by going back to the beginning and look at the mutual transformation of *tinaharupu*<sup>16</sup> and salvation. The very fact that *tinaharupu* was chosen as the translation of salvation means that the cultural understanding was being carried into the Christian notion of salvation. This is a fact that goes without saying. The reverse is also true: the very fact that the Christian notion of salvation was translated into *tinaharupu* means that the Christian notion penetrated the cultural understanding. This is a fact that goes without saying. In truth, a cultural understanding of salvation stand to enrich the Christian notion of salvation, and the Christian notion of salvation must be seen to affirm and elevate the cultural understanding. In both perspectives God has demonstrated God's commitment to the life of this earth, and the ultimate demonstration of this commitment is the cross: "God is firmly committed to the life of this world as that cross was planted in the ground at Golgotha", (Hall 2003, 23-24).

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This paper takes the position that religion and culture cannot be separated – they belong together as two interpenetrating and interweaving aspects of the dynamic nature of life lived within the totality of a given context. To substantiate this position let us look at what only three scholars say: Barbara Hargrove (1989, 29) describes religion as "a human phenomenon that unites cultural, social and personality systems into a meaningful whole." Here culture as seen as an integral part of religion. Clifford Geertz (1975, 89) defines culture as "(a) system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms

by means of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards, life.” One does not have to do rigorous interpretation to say that ‘system of inherited conceptions’ include religious conceptions. In clear terms Paul Tillich (1959, 43) argues that “Religion is the substance of culture ... culture is the form of religion.”

<sup>2</sup> For a good and concise discussion of the paradigm shifts in the doctrine of revelation see Haight (1990). The doctrine of revelation continues to be an issue for theology. Traditionally, revelation was seen as God’s completed self-revealing work, contained in the scriptures and Christian traditions but especially and ultimately in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, to whom all scripture points to in the first place. In this view, historical revelation was “closed” after the death of the last Apostle; scripture and tradition “propositional truths” contain the totality of God’s revelation. A paradigmatic shift has exposed as problematic closed revelation in terms of written texts. From an existential and experiential paradigm, which amongst other emphases presents that God’s “actions” and presence – including in and through Jesus of Nazareth – cannot be understood without their embodied expression in a particular time or place. In this view God’s revelation is seen as an existential and ongoing self-revelation in different times and places as well, and hence the revelatory qualities of culture.

<sup>3</sup> For a glimpse into such a debate see Stanley Gundry, Dennis Okholm and Timothy Philips [(eds.), 1995].

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Bevans (2002 expanded edition) devotes one chapter to the “Anthropological Model” of contextual theology. See his chapter 5, pp.55-69.

<sup>5</sup> In this sense then panentheism could be argued as the fusing of the traditional concepts of the immanence and transcendence of God. However, the description *panentheism* is preferred for ease of use but also because of the clarity of emphasis on *God in everything* which resonates both widely and deeply in religio-culture throughout Oceania

<sup>6</sup> Here Tippett makes direct reference to liberation theology which advances a socio-economic and political face of salvation.

<sup>7</sup> While elements within the UCSI hold to particular aspects of such a view of salvation, it also engages actively in the world through various program and projects in health, education and economic development.

<sup>8</sup> In the Book of Revelation the new Jerusalem is seen by John “coming down out of heaven from God ...” (21:2).

<sup>9</sup> Of course the declaration of creation as “very good” is two chapters on in Genesis, spoilt by “The Fall of Man,” which 39 books (in the Protestant Canon) later is made good again by the coming of Jesus the Son of God. But did the *fall* of man (*sic*) really change and damaged the goodness of /in creation? I believe we have some important insights to learn from the Celtic theology of nature: “It is the insight that Christ comes not to show up or illuminate the deformity of a fallen world but rather to release a beautiful and holy world from bondage ... and to dissipate the shadows that lie across all creation through the presence of the enemy and his dark angels,” [Donoghue quoted by Wessels (1994, 86)].

<sup>10</sup> *Mana* is a widely debated concept, and the point of contention is whether the term should be understood as a noun as in Codrington (1891) and Tippet (1958, 1967), or as a stative verb as in Firth (1940), Keesing (1982, 1984), Hviding (1996) and Hviding and Bayliss-Smith (2000), or possibly as both as in Tuza (1977) and Whiteman (1984). I go along with the position taken by Tuza and Whiteman, particularly in relation to Melanesia. By this I mean that *mana* in culture is understood both as ‘state’ or ‘being’ (noun) and as ‘process’ (verb).

<sup>11</sup> Hence in Christian understanding Jesus Christ is *tinazaputu* both in terms of saving act and saviour.

<sup>12</sup> Hence in the Roviana Bible and Roviana Hymn Book (translations used in the United Church in Solomon Islands) a new word *sini* was coined and used because the two Roviana words for wrong and bad, *sea* and *kaleana* respectively, were thought to be deficient in conveying the nature and seriousness of sin. In the case of Fiji, Tomlinson (2009, 41) posits that “Methodist missionaries introduced the notion of sin to Fiji. In doing so they gained a potent



weapon for their arsenal: a means by which to claim they had more mana than chiefs did.” Tomlinson notes that the choice for words and/or phrases to translate *sin* into Fijian was somewhat contentious, (see pp41-43).

<sup>13</sup> A contentious theological issue that could be raised at this point is that of the damnation of sinners. I will not delve into this issue for two reasons: first, it is beyond the scope of this paper, and second, it means engaging in speculative theology. Strictly speaking, and as Macquarrie (1977, 357) points out, rightly so in my opinion, “we cannot *know* the ultimate destiny of the world or of man ...” (*italics original*). What could be said is that the future stands open to the fulfillment of the promised kingdom of God on earth (Matt. 6:10), and with the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope that resurrection embodies, the Church is drawn into the work of transforming the present.

<sup>14</sup> Rufus Perch (1979, 233) in his Master of Sacred Theology focussed on Papua New Guinea, concluded that ‘Salvation is “the good life”; is social and tribocentric; is past, present and future at once, ’ and is lived ‘within a web of social relationships spanning the generations and extending to the ends of the earth ...

<sup>15</sup> The two sides here being those scholars who hold the position that ‘Jesus was convinced that the kingdom would come in the near future by means of a dramatic intervention by God, a position called “imminent eschatology” or “apocalyptic eschatology”, and scholars who espouse the view that “Jesus’s language about the kingdom is to be understood in a different framework, one that involves human collaboration with God,” (186)

<sup>16</sup> *Tinaharupu* is the equivalent in the Roviana language of the Bareke *tinaxaputu*, and I am using it in closing because it is in the Roviana language that the Bible used in the United Church in Solomon Islands is translated.



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## Myth of (Im)purity and the Peoples of the (Is)lands:

### A *fonua* reading of Ezra 9-10<sup>1</sup>

Ezra 9-10 is narrated with a gaze. It gazes at the “peoples of the lands” not merely to identify, but also to belittle and discriminate against. In this paper, I offer a Tongan reading of Ezra 9-10 with attention to objects of deriding gazes, and the myth/ideology behind the gaze vis-à-vis the colonial construction of the Oceanic island ‘natives.’ This reading is situated in the social location of Tongan commoners (*tu’a*), and theorized with the Tongan notion of *fonua* (land, place, sea, and people). Methodologically, it weaves together insights from various methods and categories from Tongan culture. This interpretive framework provides the lenses for enga[g/z]ing (gazing back at) the text.

### Fonua as Reading Lens

The Tongan word *fonua* (Maori: *whenua*; Fijian: *vanua*) is often translated as ‘land,’ but *fonua* is more than the

solid ground we called earth. First, *fonua* symbolizes the *manava* (womb). As a woman's *manava* is a home to a fetus, so is the *fonua* to its inhabitants. It is a *place of origin*; a place where life is conceived, sustained, and nurtured. Likewise, as a *manava* shapes the identity of a new born, so the *fonua* defines a people's sense of belonging.<sup>2</sup> To be at home in the *fonua* implies connectedness; on the contrary, to be displaced is to be *uprooted* (detached, disconnected) from one's place; to become homeless. The *manava*, besides being a place of origin, is also a *place of departure*; once departed from (as in event of giving birth) there is no going back. Any attempt to return to an originary place is futile, because it has either been altered or has ceased to exist. Similarly, any nostalgic attempt to re-enact such a place poses the risk of displacing those who occupy that space.<sup>3</sup> Here *fonua* implies *routedness*; one's place can only be negotiated *on the move*.<sup>4</sup>

Second, *fonua* includes the *tangata* or *kakai* (people). "*Fonua pe tangata*," goes one of our Tongan sayings, which literally means 'the people are the *fonua*.' Where there are people, there is the *fonua*! One cannot speak of one without the other. The *fonua* and the *tangata* are mutually connected.<sup>5</sup> What affects one also has an impact on the other. In this sense, no *fonua* is empty; to think otherwise is an illusion.

Third, *fonua* also includes the *moana* (ocean). The *moana* does not stand apart from the *fonua*; it is the *fonua*. One cannot limit the notion of *fonua* to land-space; *fonua* includes ocean-space.<sup>6</sup> As the *moana* is an open and fluid space, so is the idea of place theorized with *fonua*: it is a shared heritage, bordered by nothing.<sup>7</sup> *Fonua* resists being owned, controlled or territorialized. Fourth, and finally, *fonua* as a gift of the gods has *mana* (life-sustaining power/energy) and is therefore *tapu* (sacred). The *fonua* is required to be treated with respect, and not to be abused.

Several concepts are also formed in relation to the notion of *fonua*; two of which are integral to my reading of texts: *kakai-e-fonua* and

*kumi-fonua*. *Kakai-e-fonua* signifies the first/native inhabitants of a place/land. In contrast, *kumi-fonua* denotes those who have departed from a supposed homeland, and are constantly seeking to negotiate a place of arrival and settlement – sometimes they face oppositions; in most cases, they negotiate their place violently (as in the case of colonizers).

With the *kakai-e-fonua*/the peoples of the (is)lands, my reading takes seriously the perception of place/space in Ezra 9-10; it examines the effect of those perceptions, and seeks to locate the myths behind each claim to an originary place and/or any event of return.

Reading through the category of *fonua* is facilitated by two (unconventional) methods of interpretation that I have developed for reading of biblical texts: namely, *lau lea* and *lau tu'unga*. The word *lea* is Tongan for 'speech, language, word' or simply the 'act of speaking.' To analyse the *lea* in texts, *lau lea* focuses on the ways language and speeches are woven into the narrative (Tongan: *tufunga lea*), as well as *ways of speaking* (Tongan: *tō'onga lea*). *Lea* embodies certain viewpoints, ideas, and attitudes; it is the vehicle for constructing characters and spaces.<sup>8</sup> The *lau tu'unga* method seeks to expose how displaced subjects are positioned in relation to power and scarce resources, as well as to reveal the beliefs and/or worldviews that drive the positioning process.<sup>9</sup> *Tu'unga* refers to 'where one stands' (as in *tu'u'anga* [*tu'u* to stand; *'anga* space]) or one's position or location within a community. In Tongan society, each individual has an assigned *tu'unga*: one is either a '*eiki* (a chief or of chiefly lineage) or a *tu'a* (a commoner). Each *tu'unga* is defined by various factors (such as worldviews and beliefs expressed in myths and genealogies) that tend to validate the domination of one ('*eiki*) over the other (*tu'a*).

## Fonua Reading of Ezra 9-10

Ezra 9-10 opens within the House of God (cf. 8:35-36). There certain ùÑøéí ("chiefs") approach Ezra (9:1) with an allegation against several groups of people: äöì èùøàì ääëäöéí ääìäééí ("the people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites"); two other groups are later added

(9:2b): *āūñōéí āāñāðéí* (“chiefs and leaders”). These groups, obviously without their knowledge, are accused of committing an offense which is described in the following terms:

(i) they have not *separated* (*āāībdh*) themselves from the *ōié āāōōāú* (“peoples of the lands”; 9:1b),

(ii) they have taken some of their daughters (women of the land) as their wives (9:2a)

(iii) therefore they have polluted the *æðð ä÷āūñ* (“the holy seed”) by engaging with “the peoples of the lands” (9:2b)

Whereas in 8:31-36 Ezra and the *exiles* (*āðé āāāiä*) bring ornaments for the House, 9:1-4 portrays a different picture; an allegation of unfaithfulness is brought into the same place. Within that bordered space, the *exiles* perception of place becomes evident in Ezra’s prayer in 9:6-15. The prayer is woven into the narrative as a response to the problem of mixed marriage (9:1-5), albeit the lack of clarity as to the sort of mix that is implied. Its content is dominated by confessions of guilt (9:6-7, 10-12, 15) interspersed with acknowledgments of God’s merciful acts toward Israel (9:8-9, 13-14). The emphasis however falls on a belief that the exiles (the *kumifonua*) are a remnant (*āūñāéø*, 9:8) preserved by God to return and restore the land (9:9e). The opportunity to return comes with the responsibility to protect the land according to the instruction given in the past to their forefathers (9:11-13 [JPS]; cf. Deut 7:1-6):

*The land that you are about to possess is a land unclean through the uncleanness of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity,*

*have filled it from one end to the other. Now then, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons; do nothing for their well-being or advantage, then you will be strong and enjoy the bounty of the land and bequeath it to your children forever.*

By evoking this ancient instruction, the exiles' (*kumifonua*) perception of place becomes apparent. First, the land (claimed as a divine gift from Yhwh to his people) is something *to possess* (éòùÑ), and not to be shared. Such a view is threatening since possession always goes hand in hand with its antithesis: dispossession!<sup>10</sup> In that sense, it does not merely contradict what *fonua* symbolizes; it also gives legitimacy to colonial domination in Oceania, and the displacement of peoples in their own (is)lands. Second, the *land is unclean* (ðãã) because the uncleanness (èãã) of its occupants has filled it *from end to end* (îôã àîôã, literally 'from mouth to mouth').<sup>11</sup>

Third, to restore the purity of the land requires the separation of the exiles (*kumifonua*) from the *kakai-e-fonua*, and to avoid any activity that might promote their well-being (ÎÑîî àèãáúí, literally 'peace of them and good of them'). Separation (áãî) is here viewed as the only *means for gaining strength and enjoying the bounty of the land*. To act otherwise, as far as the narrator is concerned, would deprive them of strength and joy. Separation from the *kakai-e-fonua* guarantees the land as *an eternal inheritance* for the *kumifonua* and their children. In other words, to return to the land requires the dispossession, exclusion and displacement of those who regarded that place as their home.

Such a mindset is deeply rooted in various biblical traditions, like the covenant and the exodus. In any covenant between God and God's people in the Hebrew Bible, promise of land is one of the most vital elements. To Abraham, a promise of land and offspring was given; the *land is granted to be possessed* (Gen 12:1-2; 15:1-7). The

exodus event, and the Sinai covenant, is also narrated with the expectation of a promised land;<sup>12</sup> again, it is *a land to be possessed* (Deut 1:8),

*See, I place the land at your disposal. Go, take possession of the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to assign to them and to their heirs after them [JPS].*

As the Israelites are about to enter the land, a further instruction is also given in regard to what they should do when they possessed the land (Deut 7:1-6). First, they must *doom* those (i.e. seven nations dislodged by Yhwh [v.1]) who already occupied the land *to destruction*, and “grant them no terms and give them no quarter” (v.2 [JPS]). Second, there shall not be any intermarriage with them: “do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons” (v.3). The reason is: “For they will turn your children away from me [YHWH] to worship other gods” (v.4a); an offense that will provoke God’s anger leading to their annihilation (v.4b). Third, they shall *tear down* those people’s altars, “smash [ōūō] their pillars, cut down (ūñāō) their sacred posts, and consign (āāō) their images to the fire” (v.5). These three verbs combined indicate utter destruction of religious sites and symbols of those in the land.<sup>13</sup> As far as the Deuteronomists are concerned, that is how Yhwh’s chosen people should think and act (v.6). This is also what the narrative in Ezra 9-10, in the form of Ezra’s prayer, would like the readers to believe: *the land is unclean*, because “the peoples of the lands” *are unclean*. To purify the land requires the maintenance of (ethnic) purity by setting the holy seed apart from “the peoples of the lands.”

Ezra 9-10 frightens me on two accounts: (i) the way it portrays the *kakai-e-fonua/tangata-whenua* (the peoples of the lands), and (ii) its perception of place or its view of the land (*fonua/whenua*). It evokes in some ways some of the realities I have come to know and

experience. As an islander, Ezra 9-10 reminds me of how our islands were given names they did not ask for; names that led to the desecration of our islands and our peoples. To the colonizers, islanders were uncivilized as if civilization belonged only to the West. Similarly, our islands were perceived as “empty” places – as if the native inhabitants never existed. To missionaries, islanders were savages, hence treated as objects of Christianization. Like the perception of the “exiles,” colonizers and missionaries alike considered our cultures as utterly abhorrent and should therefore be deracinated in order to give way to the ‘pure’/‘clean.’ In most cases, the affairs of our islands were determined miles away in imperial sanctuaries, without proper consultation with the *peoples of the (is)lands*, the *kakai-e-fonua*.<sup>14</sup>

Some aspects of Ezra’s prayer however require further consideration. First, if Deut 7:1-6 is the text evoked in Ezra’s prayer, then he would have probably viewed the return of the exiles from Babylon as another exodus, whose task is to re-possess the land by dispossessing and destroying its occupants and their religion. In thinking so, Ezra is characterized as imposing a tradition that has long exceeded its relevance into a context so different from that into which the exodus generation entered.

Second, if the exiles were looking for a place of origin, that place has long gone.<sup>15</sup> The Judah they knew was ruled by their own kings; the one that they have arrived at is a province (Yehud) of a foreign empire (Persia). The hope of returning is typical of dispersed people, but as S. Hall describes from the point of view of anthropology, such a hope is “more precarious than usually thought.”<sup>16</sup> This is due to the fact that the place called homeland will have transformed beyond recognition, and “there is no going ‘home’ again.”<sup>17</sup> There can be detour but no return. The notion of home therefore is much more complex than approaches to diasporas premised on the power of nostalgia would want us believe.<sup>18</sup> In that sense, the



problem with the exiles is they are looking for a place that exists only in their memory and imagination.

Third, the notion of the ‘unclean land/people’ is in a sense ironic. While it is used as a reference to the peoples of the lands, it is more of a self-designation. As Ezra’s prayer points out, the very reason for Judah’s captivity was their own sin not the sin of others. Here the *kumifonua* (the exiles) are probably trying to shift the blame to those who remained in Judah. Fourth, Judah has always been a home to peoples from diverse ethnic origins with different religions<sup>19</sup> and values. Its boundary has always been shifting due to interactions with foreign powers throughout the centuries.<sup>20</sup> Ezra and his group are therefore not returning to the same place twice.

The idea of an unclean land is a myth fabricated by the *kumifonua* (exiles) to advance their need for settlement. I am using the phrase ‘unclean land’ to indicate my departure from Robert P. Carroll’s view that the essential stories of the Hebrew Bible are framed and constructed upon the myth of “empty land.” While Carroll’s view may be true of the Chronicler’s “sabbathization” of the exile, I contend that it is not applicable to the perception of place in Ezra 9-10.<sup>21</sup>

Within the bordered space of the House, nothing in the land deserves respect; all are subject to be (dis)possessed. In the House, the land has no *tapu* because it is unclean. To purify the land is to extend the boundary of the House as a *tapu* space to make the land a *tapu* place, and thereby be inhabited by the returnees as a *tapu* race. Such a perception degrades the life-giving *mana* of the land, imposes a boundary that excludes, and therefore shatters the mutual connection between the people and their place, and offers no sense of security to those, like the *kakai-e-fonua*, who count that place home.

Who are “the peoples of the lands”? Scholarly readings of Ezra 9-10 offer three views.<sup>22</sup> First, the “peoples of the lands” are read as *non-Judean* inhabitants of Judah during the exile.<sup>23</sup> The basis for this view is the comparison made between the practice of this group and the practices of eight groups of different ethnic origins in 9:1b. Within this reading perspective “peoples of the lands” are defined in terms of ethnicity. The problem however is that the existence of these groups in the Persian Yehud is doubtful.<sup>24</sup> The listed nations may have been used by Ezra “to pattern his own return to Israel after the Exodus and the Conquest.”<sup>25</sup> Second, “peoples of the lands” are read as non-exiled Judaeon inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> This is based on the insight that only a portion (approximately 10 percent<sup>27</sup>) of the Judaeon population (mostly members of the ruling class and skilled members of society) was deported by the Babylonians. The majority—consisting mainly of the working class, the elderly, and residents in rural areas—remained in Judah. This group may have become owners of the land and properties left behind by the deportees, and upon the return of the latter, there may have been struggles to regain the ownership of their ancestral land from those who remained (the remainees). Here, the peoples of the lands are defined in terms of their non-exiled status not ethnicity. Third, and finally, “the peoples of the lands” are read to include both non-Judaeon and non-exiled Judaeon inhabitants of Judah during the Babylonian exile.<sup>28</sup> Since the exiles regard themselves as the true continuation of pre-exilic Israel and true worshippers of Yhwh, the non-exiled and non-Judaeon inhabitants are both filed under one group who, in the eyes of the exiles, are impure and should therefore be excluded from the community. This reading defines “the peoples of the lands” in terms of their alleged religious orientation: syncretistic.<sup>29</sup> “Ezra’s [marriage] reform was therefore intended to purge these syncretistic influences from the community, thereby restoring it to a condition of holiness or purity.”<sup>30</sup> Such a condition is to be achieved at the cost of community solidarity.

From a Tongan standpoint, and through the lens of *fonua*, the designation can be read differently from the scholarly perspectives. The phrase “the peoples of the lands,” in Tongan, simply means *kakai ‘o e fonua* or the natives. It carries no sense that may refer to such a group as aliens or pagans. The phrase is an inclusive concept that includes the following aspects. First, it does not presuppose ethnic purity, simply because in real life *purity is a myth*. Second, it indicates connectedness of people to place, rather than people owning place. In Tonga, as in Oceania, people belong to the land, but not vice versa. Nobody has a right to claim ownership. Third, it requires respect to be given to natives in their places. Here lies the irony of the claim made by the exiles: those they considered unsuitable to mingle with are not at all aliens but natives of the land.

Whereas the exiles view the *fonua* as something to be exclusively possessed and owned, the *kakai-e-fonua* perceives otherwise. This can be traced from their preferred space of dwelling, which is mentioned in Ezra 10 as the square (øçää). Ezra 10 shifts from the bordered space of the House in chapter 9 into the borderless space of the square, the open (øçää). From the House, Ezra and his cohort have now found themselves in the midst of “the peoples of the lands,” in the unbounded space of the square. This openness of the square poses a problem for those (like Eskenazi) who would like to read Ezra together with Nehemiah. If one reads Ezra as such, then the wall built by Nehemiah would serve as a closed boundary for both the House and the square. To read Ezra as a self-contained narrative, the square indicates there really is no boundary.

Whether or not this shift from inside the House to the square was intentional is unclear. Only one thing is certain: the square becomes the centre of power; here the community decentred the power-claim of exiles, and ridiculed their aggressive programme of restoration. Even their self-proclaimed purity is now “polluted” in the open by mingling with peoples of the lands. The square is depicted in other texts as a ‘red light district,’ where prostitutes lie in

wait for young men (Prov 7:12). Ezekiel refers to the square in his prophecy against Israel's faithlessness (Ezek 16:23-26 [JPS]):

*After all your wickedness (woe, woe to you!)—declares the Lord GOD— you built yourself an eminence and made yourself a mound in every square. You built your mound at every crossroad; and you sullied your beauty and spread your legs to every passerby, and you multiplied your harlotries. You played the whore with your neighbors, the lustful Egyptians—you multiplied your harlotries to anger Me.*

Here the square is the place where Israel adulterates herself with foreign nations. The issue is not the square itself, but what Israel does in the square. Warning against the square is an attempt to prevent Israel from 'mingling' with others and exposes the insecurity of the one uttering the warning.

Isaiah speaks of the square as the place where honesty stumbles:

*And so redress is turned back and vindication stays afar,  
Because honesty stumbles in the public square and uprightness  
cannot enter (Isa 59:14 [JPS]).*

This negative perception reflects the view of those in the House, such as Ezra and the chiefs, whose interests are not served nor taken into account in the square. Any claim of domination is decimated and buried in the square (2 Sam 21:12). In the square, the honour of the displaced is restored (Esther 4:6, 6:9, 11). From these references to the square, it is clear that its boundary cannot be marked, simply because it has no boundary. It is an open place where people from all walks of life have the liberty to socialize and express themselves without the interference of those in authority; those in the House.

The depiction of “the peoples of the lands” (*kakai-e-fonua*) in Ezra 9-10 clearly files them under the category of exclusion. Washington raises a concern with regard to judging Ezra 9-10 under exclusion, since it

[r]epresents a Protestant, anti-cultic bias that hearkens back to Wellhausen’s disparagement of the postexilic era as a decline into arid and legalistic separatism, thus in continuity with Luther’s theological attack on the Jews, the anti-Judaism of medieval Christianity, and the *adversus Judaeos* tradition of the early Church.<sup>31</sup>

This concern offers a valid warning to avoid fostering any spirit of anti-Semitism. But to cower away from the judgment that is inscribed in the text would be utterly unfair to “the peoples of the lands”, *kakai-e-fonua*, and to readers, like Oceanic islanders and Tongan natives, who are identified with those subjects. The fact of the matter is: exclusion in any form is alienating and cruel. There is really no euphemism for the exclusivist stance perpetuated in Ezra 9-10.

## Conclusion

To read along the grain of the text, the exiles are portrayed as rightful residents returning to reclaim back the land granted to their ancestors by Yhwh. In contrast, those who are in the land, “the peoples of the lands,” are viewed as foreigners who have polluted the land with their impurity. To read the text, however, through the analytical category of *fonua*, the exiles are perceived as landless subjects (*kumifonua*) who are in search of a place of settlement, whereas “the peoples of the lands” (the alleged impure group) are read as the natives of the land (*kakai-e-fonua*), whose place, symbolized by the square, is without border and opens to all irrespective of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social status.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A paper delivered at the International Congress of the Society of Biblical Literature (Bible in the Pacific unit), July 7, 2008, University of Auckland, New Zealand. I want to acknowledge the contribution of Elaine Wainwright and Tim Bulkeley in shaping the ideas presented herein.

<sup>2</sup> Wherever a Tongan is, *fonua* is always home as long as one keeps a connection with the land and the people in any way or form. Tongans may migrate overseas, but Tonga will always be their *fonua*, their home. To keep a sense of home, Tongans resort to building Tongan diasporic communities, particularly in the form of churches. There they re-imagine and recreate the ways and practices of the *fonua*. In diaspora, people negotiate amongst them a sense of place, a 'home.' To lose one's connection with the *fonua* (land and people) is to become *homeless*! This notion of home is also the basis for referring to people's graves as *fonua*; hence the term *fonua-loto* (land-within). A grave, as *fonua*, offers not only a home for the dead, but also an opportunity for returning home, to the *manava* (womb) and to one's ancestors. In this sense, *fonua* symbolizes the Tongan life-cycle!

<sup>3</sup> Such a risk is evident in the colonial perceptions of place in Oceania. Inhabitants of our islands constantly face the issue of displacement because colonizers view some of our places as deserted islands, hence used as nuclear testing and waste dumping grounds. See Jeffrey Sasha Davis, "Representing Place: "Deserted Isles" and the Reproduction of Bikini Atoll," *AAAGeo* 95, no. 3 (2005): 607-625.

<sup>4</sup> Literature on diaspora also provides some perspectives. Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* speaks of the idea of home as "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" - A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 192. Jon Austin also points to the irony that involves in constructing or imagining of such a place that we call home. While the notion of home indicates those who belong on the one hand, it also casts up the foreigner and outsider. Belongingness always goes hand in hand with foreignness and/or otherness. The implication therefore is that the notion of home should be constructed in a manner that would include, not exclude, others. Home should be imagined as a hybridized space, a place of plurality and difference, rather than a purist space, which is limited and limiting. See Jon

Austin, "Space, Place & Home," in *Culture and Identity* (ed. Jon Austin; Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson, 2005), 111. Another perspective is from S. Nair who speaks of home as "a shifting point of origin and deferred site of return, as a multiple layer of exiles makes it a complicated task to lay categorical claim either to a homeland or to a nation." See Supriya Nair, "Diasporic Roots: Imagining a Nation in Earl Lovelace's *Salt*," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2001): 260.

<sup>5</sup> Other concepts are derived from, and coined around, this relation: for example, *tangata-e-fonua* (people of the land), *tala-e-fonua* (tradition/ways of the land/people),<sup>6</sup> and *tupu'ifonua* (indigenous people).

<sup>6</sup> The Tongan anthropologist and author, 'Epeli Hau'ofa, had a similar concern when defining the concept of Oceania: "Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of the brine and regions of fire deeper still, Ocean is us. We are the sea, we are the Ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom" ('Epeli Hau'ofa, ed., *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, USP, 1993), 16.

<sup>7</sup> To think otherwise is to give legitimacy, on the one hand, to the colonial/continental mentality that defines places into 'continents' (big lands) and 'islands' (small lands)—which accentuates the sense of smallness, inferiority and peripherality in the mind of those who are identified with the latter—and subscribes, on the other hand, to the *myth of boundary*. Boundary is only erected, physically or mentally, upon an assumption that place can be defined, owned and controlled. Even so, it appears only as an open space, if views from the top, and thus reveals the illusion of the outside-inside/centre-margin oppositions.

<sup>8</sup> This method is influenced by insights from rhetorical criticism. The term 'rhetoric,' according to Aristotle, is "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" - P. K. Tull, "Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality," in *To Each Its Own Meaning. An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application* (eds. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 160. In other words,

rhetorical criticism is about seeking to understand the means used by an author in a text to capture the interest of his or her audience. Phyllis Trible follows in the tradition of classical rhetoric by putting emphasis on the language of the text, their arrangement and design, among other stylistic aspects - see Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Gene M. Tucker; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). The definition by Vernon Robbins however provides the basis for the method designed herein (*lau lea*). Robbins defines 'rhetorical' as "the way language in a text is a means of communication among people," and 'rhetorical criticism' as an analysis "that give[s] special attention to the subjects and topics a text uses to present thought, speech, stories, and arguments" - Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 1. The point of difference between Robbins' concern and the concerns of *lau lea* lies in the categories of analysis and aspects of the text to be investigated.

<sup>9</sup> This orientation of *lau tu'unga* links itself to ideological criticism, and is in fact influenced by insights from that method. By definition, 'ideology' refers to "the complex system of ideas, values, and perceptions held by a particular group that provides a framework for the group members to understand their place in the social order" - Gale A. Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 345. This system creates a reality for people, "making the bewildering and often brutal world intelligible and tolerable . . . [it also m]otivates people to behave in specific ways and to accept their social position as natural, inevitable, and necessary" - Yee, ed., *Judges and Method*, 345. Ideological criticism in that sense seeks to uncover the production and consumption of ideologies in any given text, and it involves intrinsic and extrinsic analyses. The latter deals with historical conditions in which a text was produced, whereas the former pays attention to how the text inscribes such conditions to recreate a particular ideology. Extrinsic analysis requires some knowledge of the world behind the text; intrinsic analysis focuses on the text. The *lau tu'unga* method, like the latter, has the text and its content as its major concern. Moreover, *lau tu'unga* does not look for ideologies that drove the creation of the text, but the one that is expressed within the text vis-à-vis the ideologies that shaped the reader's culture.

<sup>10</sup> The root *éəũÑ* is rendered in Qal form 'to possess,' whereas in Niphal it means 'to be dispossessed.' Here lies the irony of Yhwh's promise to Israel. To possess the land is also to dispossess those who are already in the land.



The very land that binds Yhwh and the chosen people together is also the place where other peoples are to be displaced.

<sup>11</sup> Harold Washington argues that placing of the *èlää* in the mouth stirs in the reader “an irresistible urge to expel, a nauseous desire to vomit; in a word, what Kristeva calls ‘the abject.’” See Harold C. Washington, “Israel’s Holy Seed and the Foreign Women of Ezra-Nehemiah: A Kristevan Reading,” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 433.

<sup>12</sup> This perception of land as promise, according to Walter Brueggemann, “binds Israel in new ways to the giver [Yhwh]. Israel was clear that it did not take the land either by power or stratagem, but because Yahweh had spoken a word and had acted to keep his word. The central memories of Israel were told and retold to recall this very point.” See Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 45. While this insight helps to clarify the general perception of place in the Hebrew Bible, it provides no consolation to those who have been dispossessed and dislodged from their lands due to the myth of promise the Hebrew Bible validates and enforces.

<sup>13</sup> The religious orientation of the acts to be taken against the occupants of the land reaffirms in a sense the argument by Bob Becking that the text is narrated to give legitimacy to one form of Judaism at the expense of others. As such the reader is expected “to believe that the belief system of the Ezra-group is the only acceptable, divinely willed continuation of pre-exilic Yahwism.” See Bob Becking, “Ezra’s Re-enactment of the Exile,” in *Leading Captivity Captive: ‘The Exile’ as History and Ideology* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 61. Becking’s argument rests on the assumption that the ‘Ezra-group’ is characterised by their strict observance of the Torah and the need to reinstitute the celebration of the Passover; hence the need to rebuild the temple.

<sup>14</sup> The results of such perceptions (of places and peoples) had been the annexations of our islands, the displacement of islanders, the desecration of native sacred sites (as in Hawaii and Aotearoa), the loss of native languages, the suppression of native belief systems and symbols, the disintegration of societies due to imported values, the degradation of our natural environment, and the continuing disadvantage in many areas due to the association of our islands with global institutions (WTO, UN, and others) that are controlled not only by the rich and the powerful, but by people who have neither been to our islands nor have any knowledge that our islands do exist.

<sup>15</sup> Such a place, in the words of A. Brah, is “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return.” In Brah’s view, home in diaspora is neither the place of departure nor the place of arrival, but a hyphenated space *in-between* reality and imagination. See Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> S. Hall, “Culture, Community, Nation,” *CS* 7, no. 3 (1993): 355.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, “Culture, Community, Nation,” 355.

<sup>18</sup> Roza Tsagarousianou, “Rethinking the Concept of Diaspora: Mobility, Connectivity and Communication in a Globalised World,” *WPCC* 1, no. 1 (2004): 57.

<sup>19</sup> Yahwism is just one belief system in the diverse religious landscape of Israel. For more insights see Stephen L. Cook, *The Social Roots of Yahwism* (Dennis T. Olson and Sharon H. Ringe; Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 11. “Biblical Yahwism did not evolve out of earlier forms but existed as a religious option alongside of such other forms of religion in ancient Israel as Canaanite religious practices, syncretic forms of religion, popular or folk practices, and official, state religion.”

<sup>20</sup> See Charles E. Carter, “The Province of Yehud in the Post-exilic Period: Soundings in Site Distribution and Demography,” in *STS: 2. Temple and Community in the Persian Period* (eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>21</sup> See Robert P. Carroll, “Exile! What Exile?,” in *Leading Captivity Captive: The Exile’ as History and Ideology* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 63. See also R. P. Carroll, “The Myth of the Empty Land,” *Semeia* 59 (1992): 79-93.

<sup>22</sup> See a summary of these views in A. Philip Brown II, “The Problem of Mixed Marriages in Ezra 9-10,” *BSac* 162 (October-December 2005): 437-458.

<sup>23</sup> See Karl Friedrich Keil and Sophia Taylor, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Karl Friedrich Keil; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1873), 73-74. George Rawlinson, *Ezra and Nehemiah: Their Lives and Times* (New York: Randolph, 1890), 139. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 71. J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 60. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 148-149.

<sup>24</sup> Harold C. Washington, “The Strange Woman (אַחַד נָא אֶחָד/ḏēōēāú) of Proverbs 1-9 and Post-Exilic Judaeac Society,” in *Temple and Community in*

*the Persian Period* (eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 238. See also David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 119.

<sup>25</sup> Brown II, "Mixed Marriages in Ezra 9-10," 439. See also Walter F. Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (New York: Armstrong, 1893), 132. Peter R. Ackroyd, *I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah* (London: SCM, 1973), 252. Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (James L. Mays, *et al.*; Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 50.

<sup>26</sup> See Daniel Smith-Christopher, "The Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13: A Study of the Sociology of Post-Exilic Judaeon Community," in *Temple and Community in the Persian Period* (eds. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 243-265. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Eleanore P. Judd, "Married to a Stranger in Ezra 9-10," in *Temple and Community in the Persian Period* (eds. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 266-285.

<sup>27</sup> Joel Weinberg, *The Citizen-Temple Community* (David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies; trans. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 37.

<sup>28</sup> See Brown II, "Mixed Marriages in Ezra 9-10," 444.

<sup>29</sup> Becking views the underlying problem as one of religious struggle amongst competing forms of Judaism. See Becking, "Re-enactment of Exile," 53.

<sup>30</sup> Brown II, "Mixed Marriages in Ezra 9-10," 445.

<sup>31</sup> Washington, "Holy Seed and the Foreign Women," 428.

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The Graduation Talk as  
presented by Suliana Siwatibau  
for the 2009 Graduands of the  
Pacific Theological College,  
Suva, Fiji



The Acting Chair, the Chair designate, members of Council, Principal and staff of PTC, students and graduands, ladies and gentlemen — thank you for inviting me to share this happy occasion with you all this afternoon.

To the graduands - congratulations for having successfully completed your studies at PTC and graduating today. Congratulations also to those who taught you and others who have contributed to your success. You now go out to be Disciples of Christ in your churches. As such you are called to be **servant leaders** – to serve the needs not only of the members of your congregations but also of those of your societies as a whole. You have the potential to bring about transformational changes not only to your own people but also the Pacific islands peoples as a regional community.

**Suliana Siwatibau**

*Suliana Siwatibau is a freelance consultant associated with the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific International (a network of Pacific Islands and Metropolitan NGOs) on issues of environment, resource management and community development since 1996.*

Change is a natural process of life and our region is not exempt. However, the changes that our Pacific island communities are undergoing are probably much more multifaceted and faster than in many other parts of the world. We as a region have embraced Christianity as our religion and thereby made it an important basis of our culture. That culture however, undergoes changes all the time from individual to individual and from society to society.

Much of the changes we witness are the results of a bewildering array of influences from outside our region. The changing fashions of dress, of hairstyles, of street vocabulary, of popular music, of art forms, of technology, of standards of behaviour, of ideas and of values are just some examples. Many of our people cannot cope and our societies show signs of stress such as in increasing mental health problems and high suicide rates, alcoholism and drug abuse, increasing teen age pregnancies, single mothers and HIV/AIDS as well as increasing violence in the home. Many turn to commonly accepted foundations of our culture for security anchored in a strong sense of identity. Part of the strong sense of identity for many Pacific peoples is linked to their avowed membership of the wider Christian family.

But what does it mean to be a follower of Christ in today's Pacific? In his enlightening analysis of the life and message of Jesus in the book "Jesus A New Vision", Marcus Borg<sup>1</sup>, a Christian scholar, claims that Jesus has an intellectual as well as spiritual relevance in our modern society. Jesus, Borg claims, had challenged, and continues to challenge much of what we take for granted.

What, we might ask, are the issues and practices that Jesus would challenge us with in today's Pacific island communities?

One of the most common claims of Pacific peoples is that we separately have unique cultures that need to be acknowledged and respected. Several of our eminent theologian scholars have called for the development of a Pacific contextual theology taking account

of our special cultural beliefs and practices. This calls for an intellectual understanding of our traditional cultures and re-interpreting them to transform their practices based on the teachings of Christ.

Jesus lived within the Jewish culture of his day and understood it very well but he set out to transform it in a most fundamental way. I think that you likewise are called to transform our cultures of the Pacific through challenging what we take for granted from an analysis based on the power of the Spirit.

Wherever they go Christian churches are challenged at their interface with local cultures.

Culture is the totality of a society's way of life – its governance, its economy, its societal values and customs, and its religion. Borg identifies four main approaches of Christians in developing relationships with culture.

One approach he states is that Christians have often “legitimated culture with their religious beliefs, seeing Christianity as the endorser of their culture’s central beliefs.” I think that some churches in the Pacific may have too often fallen into this category. One does not have to look far for examples - witness the treatment of women as second class citizens of many churches based on accepted cultural practices and traditions that accord lower status to women. In this regard it has also been argued by some feminist researchers in the Pacific that the early missionaries may have contributed to the denigration of the status of women in Pacific island societies given that missionaries would have brought with them the values of their own societies at the time. Nevertheless according to Sr Emi Francis Oh, in the collection of papers compiled in “Women Doing Theology in Oceania”<sup>2</sup>, culture and tradition are often used as reasons to keep women in bondage in the Pacific.

Like churches in other parts of the world churches in the Pacific are tempted to align themselves with positions of power and influence jeopardizing their call to minister to the needs of the powerless and

marginalized. This is manifest in the treatment of persons of status or wealth as different from commoners in our churches. How many of us go to churches which reserve special seats for the chiefs or the people of wealth and power? Alignment with power is manifested in the jostling between churches for favors with national structures of power thereby directing their efforts to activities of prestige at the cost of service. Are not the churches thereby using Christianity to endorse cultural belief in the rightness of the maintenance of a hierarchical social structure and the assurance that traditional or societal leaders are the chosen of God to rule over us?

2. The second approach according to Borg is to reject culture altogether –either with indifference or with hostility- simply as “the world of darkness”. Some modern churches and sects reject our traditional culture outright as you know. This has caused divisions in families and communities that have resulted in violent clashes in some of our local communities. Jesus did not reject his culture. He was a part of it and therefore could analyze it with sharpness and great clarity. He however, rose above it and He worked to transform it.

3. A third approach is to make a sharp separation between life in the Spirit and life in culture – a division of life into two realms – religious and secular- each with its own norms. I have noted that this strict separation of spiritual life from cultural life is also common amongst practicing Christians. I believe that it is this separation that is the basis of the subjugation of nature that underlies the dominant attitude towards nature and our natural environment and the practice of resource utilization associated with our modern scientific and technological age. Unfortunately, we have all succumbed to the highly efficient and impressive achievements of modern science and technology, which treat nature not as the dwelling of God to be respected, but as something separate to be conquered, subdued and exploited. The aim of science as expounded by the great philosopher Francis Bacon is to “master nature by following the dictates of the truly natural. To do so is to be devoted to experiment to find out

the true nature of things by conquering, subduing and dominating nature.” This approach has contributed to the loss of respect for nature that many of our civilizations once had and hence to the greatest problem we now face together as a world- that is the destruction of our natural environment.

4. The fourth approach is through the “Conviction that culture is to be transformed by the power of the Spirit.” This is the way of Jesus. “Compassion, the fruit of the Spirit and the ethos of the alternative community –leads to a passionate mission to transform the culture of the day”. Taking the vision of Jesus seriously entails seeking to structure the life and values of society based on compassion. We might call it a culture of compassion.

Many modern writers have itemized what a more compassionate world might look like. It is one that nourishes human life that values relationships, that favors non-material dimensions of fulfillment and rewards culturally prized achievements, that is inclusive and stresses our commonality, which acknowledges and respects our interconnectedness with nature, that is driven by a new consciousness based on a spiritual awakening. In other words it calls for a profound transformation of the dominant culture of our day.

The values of our dominant modern culture have separated us not only from each other in denial of our common humanity but also from nature in opposition to the reality of our interconnectedness with all of creation. It is based on a world view that worships materialism, centropocentrism, rationalism, nationalism, and the unbridled freedom of the ego. Modern culture is on a path of self destruction through wanton devastation of the environment and the natural world.

Like it or not we in the Pacific are drawn into this modern culture and its values daily. We not only feel its impact – both negative and positive - but also contribute to its dynamics even if our contribution is often miniscule. Therefore we are just as responsible as everyone else.

We have seen in recent years an increase in warnings by deep thinkers both in the scientific world and in religious circles calling us to reconsider the values that form the foundations of our modern civilization and focusing on the threats that we face as co-inhabitants of planet Earth. More and more of them are converging on the conviction that not only is a radical change in our dominant culture needed but that this change has to be based on what one of them, Peter Senge stated as “the only change that will make a difference” and that is the “transformation of the human heart”. This quote is taken from James Gustave Speth<sup>3</sup> in his book titled “The Bridge at the Edge of the World”. Speth is a distinguished and widely respected leader of the environmental movement and currently dean of the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University in the United States. In his book he cogently critiques our unbridled acceptance of capitalism and its dominant values which he convincingly argues is leading us to wholesale destruction of life as we know it on Earth. He offers alternatives suggested by serious thinkers of our day profoundly concerned about the fate of our environment and the urgency of addressing our relationships with it.

The message emanating from these thinkers - loud and clear - points to the centrality of religion through the awakening of the human spirit in a new consciousness that recognizes humanity as a part of nature and not separate from it. Let me quote to you some of the writings Speth mentions.

From two experts in religion and ecology – Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim – “we are called to a new intergenerational consciousness and conscience”. They assert that “values and ethics, religion and spirituality” are important factors in transforming human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future.

Another thinker - Erich Fromm “The need for profound human change emerges not only as an ethical or religious demand, not only as a psychological demand arising from the pathogenic nature of

our present social character, but also as a condition for the sheer survival of the human race.” Fromm believed that our only hope is for a “new man” calling for “a radical change of the human heart.”

You might ask what relevance this concern, for the survival of the total of humanity, has for you as future church leaders in the backwaters of the Pacific. I think that this is where a Pacific contextual theology has the potential to play an important role and make a crucial contribution.

Pacific island peoples are generally religious. Some still practice their customary religion even though most have adopted Christianity. Indigenous beliefs provide moral/ ethical guidance for right relationships amongst peoples and between people and nature. Our ancient Pacific communities, be they the indigenous Hawaiians, the highlanders of PNG, the Maoris of NZ or the islanders of Yap, generally respected nature. They often associated with their gods and thereby considered sacred, special locations on land or in the sea, or special animals and plants. Relationships of humans and nature included a spiritual dimension that resulted in deep identification encapsulated in the concepts of Vanua or whenua for example.

Jesus too was close to nature. He used examples from nature to illustrate many of his parables and teachings. Now many of our conservation scientists are saying that only a new spirituality involving a change in the individual human heart can save our world from destruction. There is clear recognition that our survival and that of life as we know it on this earth is at stake. There is also increasing conviction that what is needed is a change in each individual’s deep seated values to those that nurture compassionate relationships both with other people and with nature resulting in the transformation of our dominant culture.

This is the challenge that you as Christian leaders in the Pacific can take up. Christ calls you to challenge accepted norms and values in order to transform our societies to ones that are more caring both

of people and of nature. This call surely makes the Gospel message more relevant in our Pacific societies that have through generations closely linked humans with nature rather than separated them.

You may say that the Christian teaching of stewardship will suffice. I do not think so. With the concept of stewardship there is still some element of power retained by the steward over the earth. It still denotes domination. I understand that serious Christian theologians continue to look for interpretations that would foster care and reverence for the environment. I am hopeful that you from the Pacific will join that flock.

In our search as Christians for a culture of compassion that is inclusive of nature we also need to look at other faiths. The great religions of the East – Hinduism and Buddhism – for example, have a reverence of life firmly based on the belief that we as humans are an integral part of a common fabric of nature closely interacting and interconnected as one reality.

All religions teach living simply at minimum levels of consumption in the interests of individual spiritual development and for the welfare of society where individual want is abolished through equitable sharing of the products of development. Major religions have a strong interest in curbing excess consumption. This is possible through integrating spiritual and material development out of which emerges an ethic of consumption that encourages a simple life style and concern for the need of others.

A good example of the integration of spiritual values with development is the work of the Sarvodayan movement in Sri Lanka<sup>4</sup>. The vision of development for this movement includes not only the material benefits but also the educational, social, cultural and spiritual requirements. The movement's ethic of consumption is accompanied by an emphasis on sharing which results in strong community cohesion. The Sarvodayan movement had grown to cover more than half of Sri Lanka's 24,000 villages.



Religious bodies have important roles to play in influencing people to consider their lifestyle choices carefully. Many are already involved in programmes that promote fair trade as well as conserve the environment. The role of the religious bodies in education and raising awareness of people on environmental issues associated with development and economic growth is potentially enormous and as yet little tapped.

It is clear that humanity cannot continue to exploit nature for the range of human demands without destroying irreversibly the environment that sustains life. We can no longer deny our spiritual relationship with nature that so many brilliant scientists have demonstrated. This relationship also links us one to another in a web that compels us to limit our demands and to consider the needs of others.

To follow Christ in the modern Pacific is an enormous challenge indeed. The people and nature in our region have suffered major abuses for the benefit of others. The Pacific region has provided sites for destructive nuclear tests, for toxic waste dumps, for exploitative forest logging, for exhaustive mining, and for commercial over fishing that has diminished our fish stocks drastically. How will you teach and practice compassion not only to your communities but also to the rest of the world in such a situation?

I wish to end with a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh,  
on our interconnectedness

*Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow  
because even today I still arrive.*

*Look deeply: I arrive in every second  
to be a bud on a spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,  
learning to sing in my new nest,*

*to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.*

*I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
in order to fear and to hope.  
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and  
death of all that are alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,  
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time  
to eat the mayfly.*

*I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,  
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,  
feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,  
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to  
Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea  
pirate,  
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and  
loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my  
hands,  
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to, my  
people,  
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.*

*My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all  
walks of life.  
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door of compassion.*

Thank you for listening so patiently to me. I rejoice with you in your achievement and wish you great blessings in your discipleship of Christ back in your home churches.

Suliana Siwatibau  
November 12, 2009

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg "Jesus A New Vision : Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship" Harper San Francisco 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Emi Frances Oh "A Dream as Metaphor for a New Vision of Church in the Pacific" in Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceania pp141 -149; South Pacific Association of Theological Schools, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> James Gustave Speth " The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability" Yale University Press 2008

<sup>4</sup> "Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World" in State of the World 2003 pp 152 – 177 by the World Watch Institute

## Book Review

In Gods Image: *The Metacultural of Fijian Christianity*

by Matt Tomlinson

(Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009)

*Reviewed by Rusiate Tuidrakulu*

Matt Tomlinson engages us in a discussion of re-imagining God in a constructive form of metacultural Christianity. In a stimulating anthropological approach, the book helps Christians (Fijian Methodists) to “think outside the box” on how God is understood in their specific locality. *In God's image*...absorbs the reader into reflection on the experiences of God in social interaction.

Tomlinson's book is a publication of his previous materials in various journals, addressing the sense of loss and the hope of recuperation in today's society. Launched early this year (2009) at Pacific Theological College, Suva, it is the product of his empirical research in the remote island of Kadavu, Fiji (1999-2006). The book comes in three main parts of situating; lamenting and recuperating Christianity considering a sense of loss in Fijian Methodism dominates the whole discussion.

For Tomlinson, Fijian life exists in the interaction of Christianity (*lotu*), chiefs (*vanua*) and the traditional systems. The activity of God's power and how it is experienced is reviewed both within and outside the sphere of Christian mission and social circumstances. This appears dangerous to what he refers to as lamenting the metacultural expressions of decline and the loss of the golden age envisaging hope of recovery in positive Christian moral acts.

Tomlinson's attempt to blend Christian experience, in sermons, hymns, worship texts and social cultural practices, into a constructive anthropological argument is notable. The book takes seriously the broadness of understanding the complexity of religion, culture and history within and beyond Fijian Christianity.

The author is critical of the traditional Christianity in the area of 'power' and 'loss' hoping for a better future. Although his argument is balanced by drawing depth of other works and the day to day experience within the society, there is still room for concern. The sense of loss that incites anxiety and is expressed in the support of political violence can be argued. Moreover, Christian influence in modern politics is seen in both ways of loosing its divine inheritance and also recovering it. Certainly, we cannot rule out the other as they are both vital in the interaction of faith journey.

Conservative and liberal Christians will find materials for both support and for critique. The author's fair treatment and recognition of the Fijian social power of *mana* (power), *lotu* (Christianity) and *vanua* (people) along with observation on the narrow view of today regarding the harmful ancestral power is revealing. If the loss directly involved the cultural dynamics of Christianity, so would be the case of recovering the inherent strength of true *mana* of God. Simply, how people view God depends on our social practice whether this is realized or not.

Future study on contemporary social and Christian experience in Fiji or beyond should include this book. Theological students, church worker and other interested people will benefit from this work. It is readable and is a scholarly contribution to the theoretical exploration of social and Christian experience in a local setting. There is plenty of food-for-thought here that challenge our mindsets and repositioning our self in a larger social context.

# Information for Contributors

## Policy Statement

The *Pacific Journal of Theology* is published twice yearly by the South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS). It seeks to stimulate theological thinking and writing by Christians living in or familiar with the South Pacific, and to share these reflections with church and theological education communities, and with all who want to be challenged to reflect critically on their faith in changing times. Opinions and claims made by contributors to the journal are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board or SPATS and its constituent bodies, nor of associations with which the authors are affiliated.

The Editorial Board welcomes various kinds of writing that express an emerging Pacific theology. These may include:

- ◆ original articles in the theological disciplines
- ◆ articles relating theological thinking to Pacific cultures, contemporary issues and other academic disciplines
- ◆ helpful material for pastors and church workers (liturgical, pastoral, educational)
- ◆ artistic expressions of the Christian faith (poetry, visual art, music)
- ◆ notes and reviews of books that are relevant for Pacific Christians
- ◆ information about ongoing research in the theological disciplines in the Pacific.

*Guidelines for Authors*: The Editorial Board will consider for publication all manuscripts of scholarly standard and in keeping with the overall policy of the journal. Articles in English, French or Pacific languages will be considered. Poetry, photographs and black and white drawings are also welcome. Manuscripts must be previously unpublished and not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

*Review policy: Criteria for Acceptance*: Following initial screening, papers are reviewed by two or more board members, using these criteria:

- Relevance and/or currency of interest to the Pacific Islands.
- Contribution to current debates.
- Originality, balance, scholarship.
- Argument, organisation and presentation. The final decision to publish is retained by the Editor and the Editorial Board, who may also suggest editorial changes for all articles submitted for publication.

*Submissions*, addressed to the Editor, *PJT*, (see SPATS contact address, inside front cover), **must** comply with the following requirements:

*Maximum length*: 6000 words (book reviews 1000 words) including notes.

*Style*: Australian Government Publishing Service, *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, 5th edn; or the 6th edn revised by Snooks & Co. and published by Wiley in 2002.

*Spelling*: British (not American) spelling is preferred. Follows the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

*Notes*: In the manuscript, all notes, commencing on a new page, must be double-spaced end- (and not foot-) notes. Notes should be substantive only not documentation. In the text, the identifier, if in superscript, should be outside the punctuation, like this: <sup>1</sup> If you use the Insert, Notes facility, the program will superscript for you. If you prefer to construct your list of notes manually, you will have to set the identifiers manually too.

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Author and date referencing in text: (surname date:page) e.g. at the end of a clause or sentence, (Ernst 1994:8); or, within a sentence, 'Little (1996:212) notes that . . . '.

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Ernst, Manfred, 1994,  
*Winds of Change: rapidly growing religious groups in the Pacific Islands*, Pacific Conference of Churches, Suva.

Little, Jeanette, 1996,  
' . . . and wife: Mary Kaaialii Kahelemauna Nawaa, missionary wife and missionary', in *The Covenant Makers: Islander missionaries in the Pacific*, eds Doug Munro & Andrew Thornley, Pacific Theological College & Institute of Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, pp. 210–34.

Cover page: A separate cover page must include: title, author's name, affiliation, postal, fax and e-mail addresses, and a list of any maps, figures etc. accompanying the text. Please include brief biographical data and a head-and-shoulders photo of the author, with any necessary information about the paper, e.g. details of where it was presented, in the case of a conference paper.

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Electronic submission: E-mail attachments addressed to the editor at the SPATS e-address are the fastest. A 3.5" diskette or CD-ROM is also acceptable. The electronic file must contain *all* files relevant to the manuscript. If hard copy is submitted, it is helpful to provide an electronic file as well.



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